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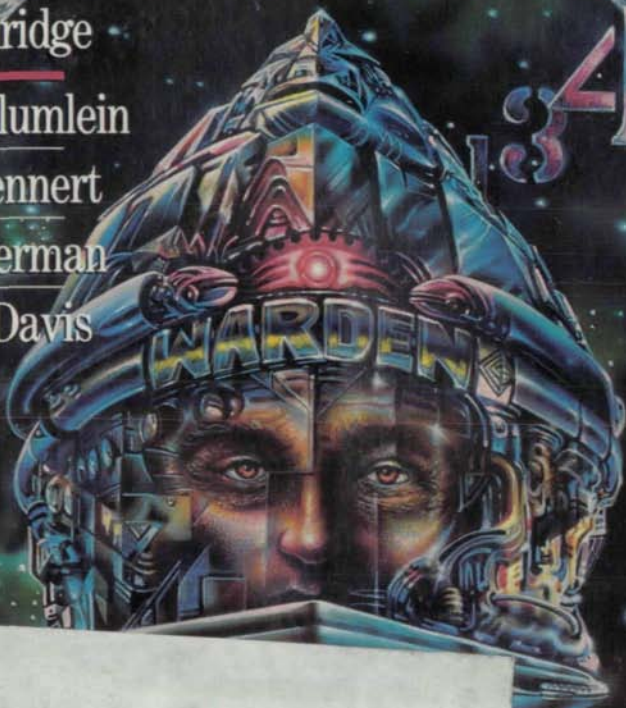
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Edited by Edward L. Ferman

Introduction by Harlan Ellison

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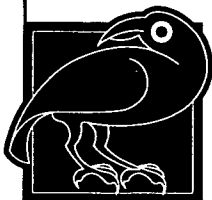
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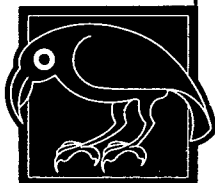
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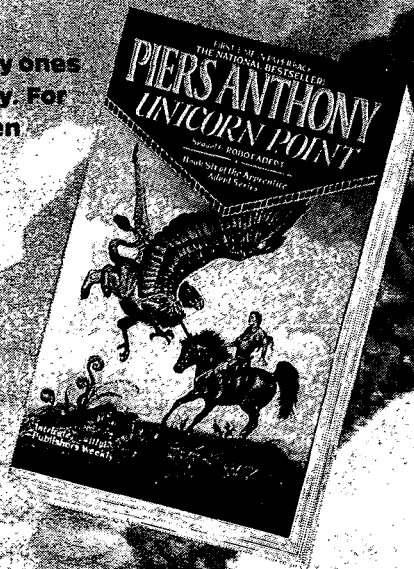
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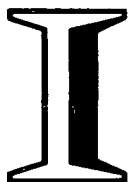
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Michael Blumlein's stories have appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies, among them Omni, Interzone and The Year's Best Fantasy (1988). He has one published novel, THE MOVEMENT OF MOUNTAINS (St. Martin's) and another forthcoming. Dr. Blumlein lives in San Francisco, where he is a physician and faculty member of the University of California School of Medicine.

BESTSELLER

By Michael Blumlein

OCTOBER 20



ONCE BELIEVED THAT poverty was a desirable state, a way for an artist to focus his mind, to distinguish the inessential from the essential. I was younger then and needed less. A simple room with a bed, a chair, a table. An old typewriter, some pencils, a stack of clean paper. I prided myself on my economies, even though I could easily have found a job and lived otherwise. Asceticism seemed the proper breeding ground for a writer.

Things are different now. I have a family, and while poverty may serve some obscure personal purpose, I cannot accept it for my wife and son. They deserve better than recycled clothes and a tiny, dank apartment. Potato soup and week-old vegetables. Better than to hear me beg our landlord for a rent extension, or come home to a frigid apartment because the heat's been cut off. Indigence is no achievement.

I hate being poor.

October 21

HAD A tough time with the book today. Dialogue felt flat, characters like they'd been collectively drugged. In the middle of asking myself what sense it meant to write something that didn't even hold my own interest, Tony called with the news that paperback rights to *In the Thicket* had been sold, but for only a fraction of what we'd hoped. And *Ordeal on the Neighbor's Lawn* had been remaindered. No big surprise, but enough to put an end to today's work. Tony gently asked about the new book, and I answered in vague but enthusiastic terms. "Commercial potential" were, I think, the words I used. They sounded less threatening coming from me than Tony, but after we hung up, their meaning seemed as baffling as ever. What the hell do I have to do to write a book that sells?

October 23

NICK GOES through clothes like they were made of paper. Seems like every few days we're either patching something or making a trip to the Salvation Army. He's needed a new pair of shoes for a month now. I told him how Charlie Chaplin used a piece of bologna to patch a hole in his shoe in *Modern Times*. Nickie was intrigued.

"Where'd he get it?"

"From walking."

He looked at me, and I could see him thinking it through. "No," he said. "Where'd he get the bologna?"

October 27

AFTER A week of toothache that wouldn't quit, Claire broke down and went to the dentist. The guy wanted to do a root canal and put in some kind of bridge. Four hundred bucks. Claire told him to pull it. I was furious.

"I can't believe you let him do that. It's your body, Claire. Teeth don't grow back."

"I'm not stupid," she said.

"I can't believe it. Four hundred bucks. Did you tell the asshole we don't have that kind of money?"

"That's enough, Matt."

"Did you?"

"Matt," she said, stopping me with one of her looks. "I've got plenty left."

It's hard to stay mad at a woman like Claire. That look of hers is a killer. To tell the truth, she's kind of cute with a gap in the middle of her smile.

October 29

TOOK NICK to the park after school, watched while he climbed the big cypress back of the tennis court. He's such a beauty, that boy. Nimble, fearless, reminded me of my own childhood, climbing like that. Young and invincible, one branch after another to the top of the tree. All sky up there. King of the world.

And even that time I fell, stepped on air instead of branch and plummeted twenty feet to the ground, even then something magical. Stunned, my rib cage vibrating like a string, I wandered through the forest in a trance. Finally made it home, bearing a lesson. The earth does not move when I strike it. Some things do not yield to my will.

Nick waved from the top of the cypress, and I caught myself praying he did not have to fall, hoping there was some other, easier way to learn.

On the way home, he kept lagging behind. Said that his leg hurt. Damn shoes, he probably got hung up coming down the tree. I promised we'd get a new pair as soon as a check comes.

November 1

CLAIRE CALLED from work in a state. They doubled the number of calls she has to take per hour, which of course makes the callers even angrier than they were to begin with. I took a break from the book and met her for lunch. She was nearly in tears.

"Some of the people are so rude. Over a goddamned dishwasher or some stupid toaster oven. Like their machine is more important than I am."

"Quit," I told her.

"This woman called today to complain that her husband's shirts weren't getting white enough. He's mad at her because he doesn't have a clean shirt to wear to work. So she calls and gets mad at me. Can you believe it?"

"What did you say to her?"

"I went through the whole routine, but she didn't want to hear. She just wanted to be mad. I don't need it."

"Everyone's mad," I said. "Quit."

"Don't keep saying that."

"You hate it."

"What I hate is when you make things sound so simple. It's like you're trying to fool me. You're telling a lie."

"It's no lie, Claire."

She looked away. "I'm not in the mood for this."

"Other people are just like us. They want their lives to live up to their dreams. They're trying to find a little hope."

"I can't believe yelling at me possibly helps." She shook her head and grumbled, eventually dismissing the subject with a sigh.

"Did you work today?"

"It was like pulling teeth, if you'll excuse the expression."

She didn't smile. "Has Tony seen any of it?"

"A couple of chapters. He thinks we can make some money. At least as much as *Thicket*."

"Not exactly a rousing endorsement."

"Forget Tony. We'll make money. If we don't, I'll find another way."

"Sure you would."

"I mean it."

She regarded me queerly, then took out her compact and freshened up her lips. After she'd gone, I stayed at the table, thinking over what I'd said. As a boy the possibilities of success abounded, but as an adult that same world seems far more difficult to locate. Nevertheless, my ambition remains fierce. This worries me sometimes. Am I lying to myself, as Claire seems to think? Could I ever truly give up writing?

November 4

Up day today. Words flew onto the page in a fury. Finished chapter 11, and, for the first time, everything seems in place. Jaime's beginning to

come around. . . . By the end he will have redeemed himself. The marriage of hope to sadness, it'll be a fitting conclusion. And just the kind of thing that'll sell.

November 5

NICK COMPLAINS about his leg. Still tender from the tree, and he limps ever so slightly. Funny, when I was a kid, seems like I recovered from bumps and bruises overnight. Maybe it's just growing pains. Anyway, I gave him a couple of aspirin, which seemed to help. If he's not better by the time Claire gets her paycheck, I'll take him to the doctor.

November 8

DURING A lull in the writing, found myself looking through the want ads. All sorts of job opportunities and the accompanying visions of wealth. I let myself go, imagining the great adventures I could have as a filing clerk, memorizing long series of numbers, breathing paper dust and filing one folder after another. Or as a loan processor, recipient of all the hope and loathing people extend onto agents of finance. A cook, perhaps, knowing as I do the masterly craft of opening cans and heating their contents. Or a secretary, typing with clumsy fingers and answering the phone with cloaked civility. There was an opening for a librarian that sounded appealing, and on a whim I dialed the number. The woman, though pleasant, was unimpressed by the fact that I was a published author. In fact, in some subtle way, she seemed to hold it against me, as though I would be the last person on earth capable of helping a reader. When she discovered I lacked the proper college degree, she advised me not to apply for the job, and hung up. Her rejection upset me, and I quickly dialed another number, choosing an advertisement at random just to prove that I was at least capable of getting past a phone call. A man came on the line, and when I told him I was interested in a job, he asked if I had experience with the DBX 2000, the TAC 143, the QT 1522, and the BRT 6200. After a slight pause, I told him yes, I did have some knowledge of car engines, having worked extensively on my old Toyota before it blew a head gasket and died a year ago. There was a brief

silence on his end of the line, and then he said he wasn't looking for jokers, and hung up.

I was deflated, feeling in some strange way that my manhood had been insulted. With unexpected determination, I searched the ads for anything to assuage my injured pride. Past dental assistants, escorts, and car salesmen. Machinists, cosmetic counterpersons, TV repairmen. None were remotely possible, and I was about to give up, when my eyes caught a box at the bottom of the page. "DONORS NEEDED," it read. "Good health the only requirement."

I called the number, and the most delightful woman answered. She represented a medical organization that was conducting a study, and if I was in good health, she would be happy to set up an appointment for an interview. Under further questioning, she explained that their research was in the field of organ transplantation, though she was quick to reassure me that the study required only a questionnaire and sample blood test. They were offering two hundred dollars to all those who enrolled. She concluded by saying, rather cryptically, that under the right circumstances, there was the opportunity for lucrative, full-time employment.

Her persuasiveness was such that I was about to make an appointment, when I realized that I had never really intended to go through with any of this. My whim had taken me further than I intended.

Thanking her, I hung up, disturbed at how close I had been to substituting some other project for the book. There's no question that money's tight, but we'll get by. The book will be finished before long, and once it sells, we'll get out of this rattrap life for good.

November 9

WALKED DOWN by the wharf this afternoon, reconstituting after a rough morning. The sharp, briny smell of salt water and fish was a tonic. The one-armed man at Scoma's, the big Italian with the crooked nose, was dumping palletfuls of crab into his chest-high vat of boiling water. Fat pink claws, severed from their bodies, floated to the surface.

I started to order one for dinner, then stopped when I realized the price. Instead, I bought a bag of fish guts and a couple of old heads. Thinking soup, but I couldn't bring myself to it. Ended up feeding the slop to some

seals, who barked and clapped their flippers appreciatively.

On the way home, I passed a quadriplegic woman playing piano with her tongue. A newspaper clipping tacked on a board behind her told how she was a single mom supporting two kids. She did a nice job, particularly moving rendition of "Amazing Grace." Big hit with the tourists. I overheard someone say what courage she must have. Yes, I thought. Undeniably. And yet it occurred to me that she's only doing what she has to, what she knows, to survive.

November 11

NICK'S LEG no better, so took him to the hospital today. Doctor ordered an X ray and a blood test. Said there was something wrong in the bone, but he wasn't sure what. Wants to do another test next week, some kind of scan of the bone. I asked if it was absolutely necessary, and the look he gave me made me feel unfit to be alive. Of course we'll do the test. That's about it for Claire's paycheck.

November 12

HAD A sweet lovemaking with Claire. It's been awhile. Unseasonably warm night kept us from having to huddle under blankets. She has such a beautiful body, the swale of her belly like some flawless planet, a geography made all the more perfect by the pale, thin scar half-hidden in her pubic hair where the doctors cut her open to deliver Nick. She told me once she had feared an ugly scar more than the surgery itself. She's still self-conscious, even though it's barely visible. She rarely lets me touch it, and I've stopped telling her it's as lovely as any of her natural landmarks. Lovelier, because it reminds me of her courage. She doesn't believe me.

Instead, I ask myself if I would have the same courage, given the opportunity. What would require it? Scars do not bother me. Nor am I especially frightened by the possibility of bodily injury. Some threat to my son? My wife? Undoubtedly. But for myself, only myself, what terrifies most is failure. It haunts my inner life, and I do whatever I can to avoid it. My act of courage, if it comes, will be to abandon ambition forever.

November 14

FINISHED CHAPTER 12, one more to go. Even at this late stage, there are surprises. Jaime turned unexpectedly dour, revealing a side of himself that augurs darkly for the book. Suggests an ending I'd hoped to avoid. People are willing to consider suffering, but only as a tonic. Redemption must prevail.

But this book will be a success; I swear it. By the end, Jaime will reveal yet another layer, a deeper one. A wellspring of faith and abiding love. I know it's there. Even the hardest hearts will weep.

November 14

ICAME HOME today to find Claire yelling at Nick. He was standing beside the refrigerator, cowering and trying not to cry. Between them on the floor lay a mess of broken eggs. Claire lifted him roughly by the arms and moved him to the side. In a voice shaking with anger, she ordered him to his room.

When he was gone, I asked what had happened. She gave me a bleak look, then knelt on the floor and buried her face in her hands.

"I hate this," she muttered. "I hate it, hate it, hate it."

"I'll get some more."

She looked up accusingly. "With what?"

"You don't have to take it out on Nick."

She started to reply, then her eyes filled with tears.

"Claire. . ."

She waved me away. "How does it get like this? Suddenly you see yourself doing something you never dreamed you could. That awful glimpse. The shame. . ."

"Talk to him. Tell him."

"I wish we had money."

"We will."

"I don't mean a lot. Some." Warily, she got to her feet. "It's not his fault."

She left the kitchen, and I stared at the mess. Half a dozen broken eggs is not a pretty sight. My responsibility? Maybe so.

Taking the rag in hand, I cleaned the floor, then went and found that ad

in the newspaper. The same woman answered the phone, same cordial, pleasant voice. As though she were the guardian of some secret of contentment and happiness. I made the appointment to give her my blood.

November 16

THE MONKEY sits on our head; we sit on the monkey. I finish the book, and an hour later the doctor calls to say that Nickie has cancer. Cancer. What is the heart to do? Between exhilaration at completing the book and this sudden grief, my heart chooses the latter. It is my son. They want to cut off his leg.

November 20

ANOTHER BATTERY of tests. Doctors now unsure whether to amputate or try to cure with radiation and drugs. We are nearly broke. The two hundred dollars I'll have after tomorrow will stake us to another week, maybe two if we stretch it. Medical bills will just have to wait. By the time we get the second collection notice, the book should be sold.

November 21

THE QUESTION of worthiness plagues me. Am I a good husband? A father? A writer? In moments of clarity, I see fame as the culmination of fear, success another name for sacrifice. Ambition has a way of being unforgiving.

The appointment was on Larkin Street, in a fancy old apartment building on Russian Hill. Its entrance was framed by marble pillars and lined by enormous stone urns the color of sand. At the top of the stairs was a glass door with a polished brass casing and a single doorbell. I was buzzed inside by a uniformed guard who asked my business. I gave him my name, which he checked on a clipboard before pointing me to a door at the rear of the lobby. It opened onto an old-fashioned elevator with a hand-operated metal gate. There were eight floors to the building, and I took the elevator to the top, where I stepped out into a carpet-lined hallway lit by a single large chandelier. Opposite me was a door with the number I'd been given.

A blue-suited man with a pleasant, generically handsome face let me in, addressing me by name without bothering to introduce himself. He was a head taller than I, and at least that much wider across the shoulders. His handshake was just firm enough to enforce the already unmistakable impression of latent strength.

He led me through a door into a second room many times larger than the first, full of furniture, sculptures, and paintings. I recognized a Van Gogh, marveling at the quality of the reproduction, until I realized that it was probably the original. A brass head I had once seen in an art book lay casually propped on a table. Beside it was a richly upholstered couch, and, at the far end of the room, a grand piano, its black top gleaming.

The opulence was overwhelming, and it was some time before I ventured away from the door. Mindful of all the precious objects, I crossed to a picture window on the other side of the room. It was a relief to look out, like having a sip of plain water after a meal of sweets.

The view was breathtaking. To the west lay the city, to the north the bay, its water gray in the blunted afternoon light. I had the impression I was staring out from a gigantic eye, far from the poverty to which I was accustomed. It was a safe, antiseptic view, and for an instant the sun broke through the clouds, throwing a bright slit of light across the water. In that moment of beauty, I forgot my sorrow, but then a door closed, breaking the reverie.

I turned, expecting to see the totemlike man who had ushered me in. Instead, it was a woman. She had a youngish look about her, but moved with the deliberation of someone older. She wore a skirt and open-necked blouse, and her skin was either lightly tanned or else naturally dark. She introduced herself simply as Devora, and, as soon as she spoke, I recognized the voice of the woman on the telephone.

We sat opposite each other on the sofa, and I casually remarked that it was a beautiful room, not at all what I'd expected for a medical interview. She replied that there was no reason for research to be conducted in austerity, and went on to explain that the foundation she represented was small and personal enough to be attentive to such niceties.

"Those who work for us suffer few hardships," she said, then opened a folder on her lap and began with her questions.

Most pertained to my health, but others concerned my family, marriage, even my financial situation. Some were quite personal, and initially

I was reluctant to discuss them. Devora was an attractive woman, her nails meticulously manicured, her hair just so. She wore several thin gold necklaces, which she had a habit of twirling through her fingers. It was a mannerism that, taken with her scrupulous beauty, called to mind a vanity that did not inspire my trust. In every other way, though, she seemed open and sincere, so that after a while I found myself willing to confide in her. I spoke briefly of my troubled career as a writer, my aspirations and current hopes for success. I mentioned Claire's dissatisfaction with work and, after a moment's hesitation, told her of the tumor in Nickie's leg. She made a note on her paper, then closed the folder and rewarded me with a look of sympathy and understanding.

"The human body can be so fragile," she said. "I'm very sorry."

"The doctors talk of a cure."

"Of course."

"He's receiving radiation and drugs. We're very hopeful."

"Certainly. And if the boy does not respond. What then?"

I was taken aback. "What kind of question is that?"

"You must have considered it."

"It's none of your business."

"Forgive me."

A silence ensued, which she seemed in no hurry to break.

"They'll have to cut it off," I muttered. "Give him some sort of fake leg."

"A prosthesis."

I nodded.

"If it were possible for your son to receive a real leg, one of flesh and blood, would you consent?"

"I don't understand."

"A living limb. A transplant."

"The doctors have never mentioned that."

"The operation is rarely done," she said with authority. "The donor requirements are so strict as to virtually prohibit it."

"Then why do you ask?"

"The foundation is interested in the attitudes people have toward transplantation."

"It must be expensive."

"Forgetting the cost."

I gave her a look.

"Come now. You're a writer. A thinker. Take it as a philosophical question." She played with a necklace. "If a limb were available, if it could be grafted on, would you consent?"

I sensed that some trap was being laid, but she did not seem the type. Still, I felt the need to consider carefully. I stood and walked to the window. The clouds now covered the whole of the city, bathing it in a marbled, celestial light.

"Yes," I said at length. "I'd consent. What father would not want his child whole?"

"It is a great gift."

"You have children?"

"One," she said without elaboration. She looked at her watch, then stood and smoothed her skirt. "You've been very patient."

She led me to a door opposite the one she had entered, and motioned me inside. When I realized she was not going to follow, I stopped and asked about the money.

"You'll receive a check within the week."

I hesitated briefly before asking if there were some way to be paid sooner. She started to say one thing, then stopped herself.

"Of course. I'll take care of it. And again, thanks for your cooperation."

She left, leaving me alone in this new room. It was small and windowless, unpleasantly lit by a fluorescent rectangle of overhead light. In the center was a narrow table, on either side of which was an armless plastic chair. In one corner was a sink, and in another, a refrigerator. Black-and-white photographs graced the walls, highly magnified views of people's faces. I was studying the lobe of an ear, when a man entered the room. He wore a white lab coat and looked uncannily like the man I had first met. He had me sit opposite him at the table, then opened a drawer and brought out a needle, syringe, and tourniquet. After tying the tourniquet around my arm, he slid the needle swiftly into a vein, causing the barest whisper of pain, and drew off five or six tubes of blood. He finished almost as soon as he had started, releasing the tourniquet and pasting a small bandage on top of the puncture wound. He marked the tubes with a pen, aligned them in a metal rack at the end of the table, then stood up with the rack in hand. He thanked me and pointed to a door, then turned and exited by another. Opening the one he had indicated, I found myself in the very first room I had entered.

I was disoriented, and stood for a moment wondering what to do. Just then, yet another door opened, and the man in the blue suit who had first greeted me appeared. From his vest pocket, he took out a plain white envelope, which he handed to me. I was embarrassed to look, but felt foolish not to, and ended up turning my back and quickly checking the contents. Satisfied, I slid the envelope in my coat pocket, thanked him, and left.

In the elevator I looked in the envelope again. Four fifty-dollar bills, as crisp as crackers. Easy money. It made me want to come back.

November 29

TONY IS lukewarm on the book. He tries to be kind, says things like, "It's idiosyncratic. Challenging." He wants more of a resolution, meaning, if not complete sunshine, at least a healthy glow of happiness at the end. "Does Jaime have to suffer so much?" he asks. I feel like telling him to ask Jaime, instead reply that suffering is the human condition, is only a small step on the larger road to enlightenment. I tell him this is a story about love, and love involves sacrifice.

"We're just a breath away from paradise here," I hear myself saying. "Let the people judge. They've learned from their soap operas. They know how to pick a winner."

November 30

GOT A letter from Devora and the Kingman Foundation today. Says if I'm interested in further work, to give them a call. I'm not. The conversation yesterday with Tony has left me surprisingly upbeat about my chances with the book. I'm a writer. I'll wait.

December 6

NICK IS brave as hell. He limps all the time, obviously in pain, but he hardly ever complains. Worst thing for him is not being able to go out with the guys after school. By then he's so exhausted he has to come home for a nap. Sleeps until dinner. His appetite's off; doctors say the treatments will do that. Claire's a wreck,

seeing him like this. Like part of herself has ceased to function properly. I'm not much better. We're barely eating, waking five, six times a night out of worry.

This thing's a family disease.

December 11

MET WITH Nick's doctors today. Grave men, but humane. Treatment not going as well as they'd hoped. Nick can't tolerate the doses they need to eradicate the tumor. All agreed to give it another couple of weeks. If no response, amputation.

I asked about a transplant. Difficult, they say, much harder than kidney or even heart. Cadavers don't work; donor has to be living and vital. Limbs remain viable for less than an hour after death.

"Obviously hard to find a living person willing to part with his leg," says one of the doctors.

"Prosthetics are getting better all the time," says another.

I ask about cost.

"A lot," says the doctor in charge.

"What? A hundred thousand?"

"More."

"Two?"

"After it's all over, probably half a million."

A daunting figure. I glance at Claire, who's staring at the floor, trying to contain herself. Anger rises in me, and then from nowhere an overwhelming sense of failure. Irrational as it is, I feel responsible.

December 13

THE CITY is filled with the smoke from a brush fire a hundred miles to the east. Tiny white ashes float in the air, as though this were the Day of Judgment. People go methodically about their business without the slightest concern. I myself feel at the mercy of circumstances beyond my control, ironically the first breath of fresh air in months.

We are dead broke. It's a kind of freedom. Stark, but unencumbered by the swamp of egotism and pride. Now I have no choice but to get a job.

I spread the want ads on the floor, poised with my foot to stamp at random, when the phone rings. It's Devora.

"You received our letter?" she asks.

"Letter?" I'm about to hang up, when I remember.

"We like to call to be sure," she says smoothly.

"Nicholas," I reply, embarrassed at my forgetfulness. "He's been a pre-occupation."

"I understand."

Do you? I want to say, angry at her wealth and good health. Instead, I glance down at the newsprint under my foot. An ad for a school of technical and creative writing, promising exciting and rewarding careers. The ultimate self-indictment.

I tell her I'll take the job.

December 23

IT'S A funny kind of work. I've been poked and prodded by three different doctors, scanned by at least twice that many machines, had tubes passed down my throat and up my ass, blood drawn, eyes and ears checked, exercised, rested. . . . It goes on. Some of the tests are done in the Larkin Street apartment, but most in a private and fancy little clinic near Mission Bay. Everyone's nice as can be, making me feel a bit guilty. These tests would cost anyone else thousands, and here I am getting paid to do them. And paid handsomely. It's the easiest money I've ever earned.

As Devora has explained it, the foundation's work is in the area of clinical transplantation, and, according to her, they've been highly successful. My job, after this initial phase, will be to provide certain material, such as hair and skin, for grafting. My tissues have been matched to another man, who will receive them. Although the work will be intermittent, as long as I remain available, my salary will continue. Raises, she promises, will be frequent and generous.

January 22

It's been nearly a month now, and I've yet to be called on. From time to time, I find myself wondering what it will be . . . a small piece of skin,

a tuft of hair? For the most part, though, I've been too busy to think about it.

We've moved into a beautiful new apartment at the tip of Grant Avenue. Three bedrooms, big kitchen, and a living room with a fireplace and a spectacular view of the bay. I spend hours just sitting in my arm-chair, beer in hand, luxuriating in the warmth of a well-heated room and the panorama of sky and water. We bought a television and VCR for Nickie to use while he's going through the exercises with his new leg. He's doing remarkably well, considering the amputation was little more than a month ago. Stump's all healed; he's got his energy back, raring to go. Amazing how he bounces back.

No word yet on the book, and, other than these entries, I'm not writing. I'm making good money as it is. Why torture myself to be rejected?

January 31

I WAS CALLED today for my first "assignment." A few tufts of hair from the back of my scalp. They use an instrument that looks a little like an apple corer, but much smaller. Because my hair is so thick, the missing spots are hardly visible. The whole thing lasted about an hour, and now I am back home, sucking on a beer and watching the rain sweep across the city. It's a lovely sight, and I feel no need to improve on it.

February 10

LATELY I'VE been wondering about the man on the other end. Devora says that someday I'll meet him, though she seems in no particular hurry. I gather that he's quite a bit older and not in the best of health. Selfishly, I find myself hoping that, even in sickness, he survives a long time.

The part of my scalp where they took the hair is virtually healed. The scabs came off yesterday, which makes the itching much less. The rectangle of skin from my inner thigh, however, is another matter. They used something called a microtome, which supposedly takes off only the thinnest of layers, but it feels as if they branded me with an iron. The area is all red and hurts like hell to touch. I haven't been able to go out because my pants rub against it. No sex all this week.

February 15

SECOND WEEK, and skin graft still not healed. Somehow it got infected, which isn't supposed to happen. Now I'm on antibiotics and bed rest to air it out. The doctors couldn't be nicer, but I'm not used to being sick. Makes me cantankerous. To top it off, Tony called with bad news. Because of disappointing sales of my first two books, they're not making an offer on the new one. Fine. Let them wither in the heat of my future fame and success.

February 20

DAMN SORE finally healed enough that Claire could touch me without my feeling she was sticking a knife in my leg. We made love gingerly, despite the weeks of pent-up desire. Afterward I found myself unconsciously fingering the scar on her belly. She didn't seem to mind, maybe because she was busy trying to arouse me again.

"This stays," she said.

"You bet."

"I mean it. It's one part I'll never let them take." Her face was hidden, and I couldn't tell if she was joking. The idea sent shivers down my spine.

February 24

IMET KINGMAN Ho today, after whom the foundation is named. A tall man with a face that was once probably handsome, he was looking out the big picture window in the living room when I arrived. Devora introduced us, and I held out a hand that he did not immediately take. Instead, he looked at me from behind his thick glasses with eyes that were impossible to read. I remembered gazing out over the city on my first visit, thinking it lovely, though distant and dreamlike. The feeling I had as he looked at me was much the same but in reverse, as though I were a landscape of his own imagination. Either that or an article of clothing he was appraising.

It made me uncomfortable, and I became conscious of my imperfections: the faint scar on my cheek from a boyhood accident, the part of my

nose that was broken in a fall. For some reason I felt I should apologize, but instead, I mumbled some inane comment about the view. He looked at me quizzically, as if surprised that I was capable of speech, and turned to Devora, who whispered something in his ear. He nodded and managed to smile at me, then left the room. Devora adjusted one of the necklaces at her throat.

"He likes you," she said, an assessment that seemed beyond the realm of anyone's knowledge. I asked what made her say so.

"He has no choice," she replied. "Kingman is ill. You may have noticed."

"He seemed distant."

"Renal osteodystrophy," she said cryptically. "His bones are like eggshells."

"He's in pain?"

"Great pain," she said. "Seldom will you meet a braver man."

I thought of Nick, who more than once has humbled me with his courage.

"My son is brave."

She stared out the window, nodding ever so slightly. "They say that courage is contagious. How is the boy doing?"

"Well. He's already walking."

"The money is sufficient? There's been no interference with his care?"

"You've been more than generous."

She nodded again, this time turning to face me. "They say that that, too, is contagious."

She left the room before I had a chance to ask what she meant, and a moment later I followed, ushered out by the man in the blue suit.

At home tonight I looked up the disease in a book. Something having to do with kidney failure, the bones becoming wafer-thin because all the calcium leaches out. Later on, in bed, I found myself rubbing my flank, and Claire, sensing that something was troubling me, stilled me with her hand. Then she kissed where I had been rubbing, outlining the area with her tongue, as if to describe a future scar to match her own. An uncanny woman, choosing just the right moment to show her tenderness.

"I love you no matter who you are," she murmured, as she has so many times before. It makes all the difference.

* * *

February 27

DEVORA DROPPED by today, ostensibly to see the apartment and meet Claire. She wore a gay-looking dress with a scooped collar and the omnipresent gold chains at her throat. Claire was cordial but ill at ease, and I could tell from the beginning she was waiting for the visit to be over. At a certain point, she excused herself to make tea, and Devora used the opportunity to inform me of some upcoming work. At the same time, she handed me a "bonus" check of five thousand dollars. I stared at it for a moment, then folded it and put it away.

"Please don't mention this to Claire," I said, sensing it was unnecessary to ask. "It's always been hard for her to accept good fortune. I'll tell her later."

"Be politic when you do," said Devora. "I don't want her to fear me more than she does."

"What she fears is the sudden wealth."

"Perhaps." She was pensive. "And you?"

"I fear that it will end."

March 8

A WEEK NOW since they took the kidney. Except for some pain when I turn or move fast, I don't even notice that it's gone. The initial shock of being asked to part with it has passed. So, too, the surprise that the recipient is Kingman Ho himself. Wealth makes its own rules. I look at it like this: if Nickie or Claire needed a kidney in order to live, would I offer one of mine? Without a second thought. So isn't what I'm giving them now nearly the same? A decent place to live, food when they're hungry, heat, clothing. By donating my kidney to Ho, I'm simply giving my family a life they deserve.

March 21

ATTENDED A small party at the Larkin Street apartment this evening. After considerable persuasion, Claire agreed to come, and Nick joined us. We were met by the nameless man in the blue suit, who took our coats and ushered us into the living room. Devora stood beside the piano, drink in hand, talking to a woman

who might well have been her twin. Kingman Ho was nearby, surrounded by a clump of judicious-looking, well-tailored men. Several couples stood by the window, taking in the magnificent view, and beyond them, warming themselves by the fireplace, two of the doctors who had examined me. A servant in a starched black dress brought us drinks, and, a few minutes later, a girl served us hors d'oeuvres from a silver tray. She couldn't have been more than a year or two older than Nick, though her manners were those of an adult well-trained in service. She held out the tray to Nickie, who didn't know quite what to do. He looked to me for help, while the girl, in complete possession of herself, urged him to take one of her tidbits. I nodded my approval, then took one myself, a bit of a cracker heaped generously with caviar. It was delicious, and I had another.

At length, Devora came over with Kingman, clinging unashamedly to him as if he were some prize catch. I did not immediately grasp the significance of this. Admittedly, the man looked fitter than before, his color better, his attention crisper, but his stolid manner seemed a world away from Devora's youthfulness and vigor. She was a good twenty, even thirty years his junior, yet here she was nuzzling his neck like some restless colt. It occurred to me she might be a daughter, yet her attentions seemed anything but filial.

Kingman greeted me with more warmth than when we had first met. He held my hand longer than was necessary, using the opportunity to once again appraise me. This time I returned his scrutiny, and after a moment he smiled, releasing me with a muttered word of appreciation. He introduced himself to Claire, gracefully slipping her hand through his arm and steering her away.

"He seems to have recovered his health," I said dryly.

"Remarkably," replied Devora, looking after him. "He's a new man."

"Perhaps I should be flattered."

She considered this, then took a step closer. She was a little drunk. "For the first time in years, he performs like a man." She touched a necklace, smiling to herself. "I had all but forgotten. Imagine. Now I am called on to be a woman again. Who would have thought?"

"I'm happy for you," I said, but in truth I was not. It seemed wrong that Ho, already so much older than she, was performing with a body not wholly his. More than that, it seemed improper, as though I were being used in some strange and undignified way as a sex surrogate. This I had

never agreed to, and I was about to say something, when Devora's look-alike interrupted us. She introduced herself, and I casually asked if the two of them were twins.

"You flatter me," said Devora.

"My mother knows the secret of youth," said the woman. She brushed a stray hair from Devora's cheek and whispered something in her ear. Devora nodded, and the woman, excusing herself, left.

"Mother?" I said. "To her? She can't be less than thirty."

"A beautiful girl," said Devora proudly.

"How old are you?"

She smiled coyly, touching one of her necklaces. Just then a piece of wood caught fire, momentarily brightening the room. It cast a sudden light on her throat, revealing a thin white scar at the base of her neck. I stared at it, then her eyes. They were laughing at me.

"The others are well-hidden," she said.

"I'm embarrassed."

"Don't be." She lifted a glass of wine from a passing tray, holding it aloft as if in toast. "What greater act of creation than to create ourselves?"

Later that evening, watching the fog slip through the Gate, I happened to catch Nick out of the corner of an eye. He was sitting on the floor at the far end of the room, partially obscured by one of the piano legs. Kneeling next to him was the serving girl. At first I thought they were playing some game, so enrapt were they, but after edging a little closer, I saw they were doing something different entirely. Nick had his pant leg rolled up, and the girl was fingering his prosthesis. Inch by inch she was creeping up the leg, circling it one moment, stroking it the next, coddling it as though she were unearthing some priceless relic. Nick was utterly entranced, as mesmerized by the girl's attention as she was by his false limb. When she came to the edge of his pant leg, she'd stop and glance up, waiting for him to roll the pants up farther. Little by little the entire limb was becoming exposed.

By the look on his face, Nick seemed actually to be feeling the girl's touch, as though the intensity of her exploration were awakening some hitherto slumbering receptors in his phantom limb. There was a charge I could feel from across the room.

I was torn about what to do, feeling on the one hand that it was my

responsibility as a father to intervene, and on the other, that to interrupt now might only reinforce the stigma of Nickie's handicap. The choice was made moot when one of the adult servants found the girl and with angry words pulled her from the room. The spell broken, Nickie became suddenly self-conscious, fumbling abashedly with his pant leg. I rushed over and helped him to his feet, saying nothing of what I had seen. I suggested it was time to leave, and, after looking quickly around the room, presumably for the girl, Nick agreed. I had an arm on his shoulder, but he shrugged me off, preferring to make his exit alone.

He fell asleep in the car on the way home, but a parent can never be sure. I decided to hold off telling Claire of the incident, and, to pass the time, I asked her opinion of Kingman Ho. They had spent nearly an hour together.

"I think there's something terribly wrong with him," she said. "We weren't together for ten minutes before I wanted to comfort him. A complete stranger. It's not what I expected."

"Suffering has a certain allure. Ho's been ill with one thing or another for years."

"When he speaks of himself, it's as though he were someone else. Once he said something — I don't remember what — and I found myself thinking, This is a man who lives in a mirror. A brittle, distant mirror."

"He's arrogant. And rich. I think he makes a point of staying aloof."

"He told me he holds himself in contempt. I asked him why, and he said for lacking the strength to die."

"He's posing, Claire. It's cocktail-party conversation."

"He scares me," she said, shivering against the cold and pulling Nick into her. "I wish we didn't depend on him."

"You have it backward," I told her, angry that she had been affected this way. "I'm the one who holds the aces. Kingman Ho depends on me."

May 3

LAST MONTH it was the small bones in my ear. A week later my right eye. It's amazing how quickly I adapt. Unless someone whispers to my left, I hear almost as well as before. And except for a certain flatness of vision, which becomes less noticeable each day, my eyesight is unchanged.

I run into Ho from time to time. He is polite, even cordial, and ironical-

ly, I'm now the one who's keeping a distance. There's little I have to say to him, and what I do usually comes out rudely. The fact is, I don't like him. He takes and takes like a spoiled child, and what does he give in return? Money. It's a cold reward.

Nevertheless, when we meet, I look for signs in him of recognition. I often find myself staring at his right eye, the brown one stippled with green, the one that is mine. It looks stony in his face, callous, yet every so often it takes on a gleam too familiar to ignore. I know your motives, it seems to say. You cannot lie.

Sometimes I want to claw the eye from his face.

May 5

Tony called . . . another rejection. I told him I don't care. For the first time that I remember, I feel liberated from the yoke of the marketplace.

May 17

THERE IS something erotic to all this. It embarrasses me to say so because it sounds perverse. Yet each time they take part of my body, my sexuality becomes heightened. The toes were taken a week and a half ago, and since then I've been in a state of constant erection, having wet dreams nearly every night. Claire, always before my sexual match, has been eclipsed by this newfound desire. It's as if my unconscious, fearful of its survival, has panicked, triggering a surge of sexuality in the hopes of perpetuating my genetic stock before I suffer extinction.

At times I have the feeling I am approaching a new and primitive state, one of explosive creativity and gratification. The compulsion for language and abstract thought has become remote, making me wonder why I ever bothered writing at all. In comparison to the language of the body, words say so little.

Claire, who knows me better than I know myself, thinks I'm a little mad.

* * *

May 23

They want my arm. My right arm. Shoulder to fingertip. I'm afraid.

May 31

THIS PAST week has felt like a year. The fear of apprehension is with me constantly. The blue-suited bodyguard will appear, blandly crushing me in his arms and taking me back. Or Devora will arrive, bearing some new manner of persuasion. A subtle change of posture, a lilt in her voice, the veiled promise of some favor impossible to refuse. Or Kingman himself, man of few words, instigator of my flight. Armless now, with no finger to pull the trigger, no hand to make me dance at his insane command. He will come to beg for my limb.

Let him. Let him feel my contempt at his wealth and power. He is not a man. No man would do to me what he has done. More than anything, I fear my own uncertainty. I could tell them I'm through and put a stop to this thing once and for all. Or else give them the arm and be done with it. Why run?

Wealth and success are not easy to dismiss. What if Kingman dies? Kingman the Brute, the Cruel. My patron. What then?

June 3

The wind howls in the canyons, scouring the earth with sand. The heat of the desert sun is unbelievable. I hide in my motel room and wait. I'm convinced they know where I am. Why don't they come?

June 5

ONE'S SELF-IMPORTANCE diminishes greatly out here. The desert is too big, too raw and exposed to suffer pride and deceit. I see that my hatred for Ho is little more than the mirage of my own inadequacy. I cannot despise him for wanting my arm, any more than I can despise my son for wanting a new leg. It's man's nature to fight disintegration and decay.

But more, I begin to see that Kingman Ho and I are linked. Each layer

of skin, each organ that I give weds him more firmly to me. He is my creation. Running from him is tantamount to running from myself.

June 29

ABSENCE IS a stronger state than presence. It derives shape from the imagination, from loss and need. The arm has been gone for weeks, but when I close my eyes, it is still there. I feel sensations in thin air, pain, heat, motion. I hold a pencil, a cup of coffee in a phantom world, stroke Claire's back and feel the texture of her skin with a hand that can't be seen. But something exists — I know it — something that could not be severed from the tracts of memory.

I imagine the arm hanging from Kingman's side, attached to his nerves and muscles, moving to his command, but all the while maintaining a deeper program, untempered by conscious thought. I picture the hand accenting the air with my mannerisms, writing in my script, stroking Devora with my touch. The limb is a ghost, and I, the ghostwriter. As I serve Kingman, he serves me.

July 2

WE HAVE more money now than we know what to do with. Claire has quit her job, and Nick has private tutors to help him make up the time he's lost. I read rather than write, or else sit in the armchair with a beer and watch the bay change colors. I don't feel lazy. My job is to heal.

July 15

IT'S SURPRISING how fast I recover from these operations. Just a few days ago, they took a piece of bone from my pelvis, and already I'm able to move around quite well. Except for the skin graft months ago, I've had no problems whatever. I can't say the same for Kingman. Even though our tissues are matched, he still seems to struggle through almost every procedure. His age must have something to do with it, and Devora says the drugs he takes to keep from rejecting my tissue get in the way of his healing. It's hard to see anyone suffer as he does. I pity him and

sometimes wonder why he persists. Does he truly fear death, or is there some other reason that he prolongs his life? Perhaps immortality is a motive in itself.

July 18

WOKE UP from a dead sleep last night wondering, of all things, what Kingman had for dinner. Not simply the menu, but how he had eaten, and with whom. Was it a lively, high-spirited meal or tiresomely dull? A pleasure or, in his old age, a chore? Did he eat alone or with company? In suit and tie or more casually? What did he say?

It took me an hour to get back to sleep, and in the morning I needed two cups of coffee to wake up. As I poured the second, I tried to remember if I'd ever seen Kingman drink coffee? Black or with cream? One cup or two?

July 21

WHY HAVEN'T they called? It's been nearly a week without a word. Something bad has happened; I know it. Two things come frightfully to mind. Kingman has finally gotten too sick to need me. Bad enough, but the other is worse.

They've found a new donor.

July 24

FINALLY. EARLY this morning, pitch-black outside, the phone rang. It triggered a dream, and I reached out to Claire with my phantom limb. She murmured something and nestled into my empty socket. I picked up the receiver.

His voice was urgent, lacking its familiar polish and restraint. He demanded to see me immediately, insisting that I meet him at his apartment. I agreed, but when I asked what was the matter, the phone was already dead.

Outside, the fog had settled to ground level, as thick as if it had sprung from the earth itself. Kingman's building was all but invisible from the

street, the tall Greek columns seemingly anchored to clouds. A night clerk let me in, saying that Mr. Ho was expecting me. I wiped the moisture from my face and hair and entered the elevator. At the eighth floor, I started to exit, when Kingman suddenly appeared, shoving me back inside. He pulled the gate shut, hit the down button, then stopped the elevator between floors.

"The records," he said, facing me with wild, bloodshot eyes. "Where are the records?"

I searched my mind for some previous mention of records. Something to orient me. But he did not wait for a reply.

"I need to know what they're doing. All of them. Earnest faces, yes, but none as honest as they pretend. I've tried to get messages out. It's some game, isn't it? Some imposter's ploy. . . ."

"Game? I don't understand."

"Why are they giving me four pills at night and only three in the morning? Tell me that, if you can."

"Four? Three?"

"It's a charade, isn't it? An imitation." He grinned, as though pleased with himself, but the look was quickly gone. "It moves on channels beyond what the others can detect. It's lost to them, but not to us. Tell me, who are the higher authorities? Who pulls the strings?"

"I'm asking for your help," he said, more urgently now. "Tell me what to do. I hear them talk. Even behind my back, it's obvious what they're saying. But I will not be discouraged."

"They couldn't do this to an ordinary man. I see it, and I am above it. When I will it to stop, it will stop. Do you understand? It's my duty."

His voice was high-pitched, his manner desperate. He paced frantically, but careful not to touch me. All at once he stopped.

"Can you smell the decay? Even a strong person can't hold out forever. I need answers. Help me."

The man was clearly out of his mind, and I worried that the tiny space we were in was making him worse. I inched over to the elevator's control panel, eyeing the switch that would set us in motion, but as soon as I got close, he blocked my way. With a menacing look, he leaned against the panel, bracing himself with both feet planted firmly on the floor. He placed his palms together in an attitude of prayer or warning and shut his eyes.

For the first time, I got a good look at him. His hair was disheveled, his face mottled and red. His skin was marked by scores of tiny capillaries, many of which had burst. At one side of his neck, peeking above his shirt collar, was the edge of a recent skin graft. It was swollen and purple, with a crust that oozed yellowish liquid. I felt an urge to run, which was impossible, but also to comfort him. He seemed in furious pain, and had now put himself in a position of no escape. But when I stepped forward in an effort to help him, he opened his eyes and growled at me. I tried some words to calm him, but he only laughed, accusing me of trying to control him with my voice.

"I see what you're thinking," he said. "Trying to trick me with your deep tones. Don't you see that I'm your reflection? This is no joke."

He started humming to himself, a hysterical tune of his own making. Suddenly the elevator began to move. His head darted frantically from side to side, and he slapped at the control switch and the buttons. To no avail. Inexorably the car ascended, and, at the eighth floor, the blue-suited man was there to pull back the gate. Beside him, in slippers and bathrobe, stood Devora. The sight of her seemed to take something out of Kingman, who, having backed into a corner, let out a shuddering sigh and collapsed against the elevator wall.

We carried him into the apartment, and twenty minutes later Devora returned to tell me everything was all right.

"I must apologize for my husband's behavior." She offered me a drink, which I readily accepted. "Some of these drugs have such terrible effects."

"I don't know which of us was more scared."

"Him, I imagine." She took her drink to the window. "He's not himself these days."

"I'm not surprised."

She stiffened. "The irony does not escape me. But no, he's not." She sighed. "I suppose it's a wonder that things don't change any faster than they do."

I had no reply, and stared with her out the window, the reflection of our faces seeming to float in the fog.

"Have you ever written a book, then thrown it out? Destroyed it because it wasn't what you knew you could create, what you wanted to?"

"A book changes in the writing," I told her. "And then later, after. It could always become something else, something to cherish."

"Do you fall in love with what you write?"

"I suppose. Of a kind. It's always a stormy affair."

"But when things go bad, when they go astray, you know what to do."

I shrugged, and then all at once I understood what she was asking. "Someday Kingman will die," I told her. "Then you'll find out for yourself."

"I know how I'll act," she said quietly, as if she'd already planned it out. She seemed grateful to be able to tell me. "Is that shameful?"

"It's too early in the morning for shame."

"Yes." She touched a necklace and turned. "Do you find me attractive?"

I worked on my drink. She watched me and waited.

"You know the answer," I said at length. "You wouldn't have asked if you didn't."

"Vanity is such a scourge," she said with a self-deprecating little laugh.

I examined myself, my missing arm, toes, and the rest.

"Isn't it."

July 28

TONIGHT, AFTER I read him a bedtime story, Nick grabbed onto my arm and wouldn't let go. After a few minutes, I asked him to stop, but he held on tighter.

"You have to stay," he said.

"Nickie, it's bedtime."

"I won't let you go."

"Three minutes," I said, relenting. "And then you sleep."

"You count."

The minutes passed, and when the time was up, Nickie still wouldn't let go.

"You have to leave your hand with me," he said.

"I've only got one left," I answered jokingly, touched by his possessiveness.

"Promise you won't take it away."

"I'm right next door, Nickie. I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise."

"I'm your father," I said. "You can't lose me." Gently, I pulled my arm away. "I love you, Nickie. I promise."

* * *

July 30

CLAIRE AND I naked in bed, her fingers working my back. One vertebra at a time, outlining each bone and muscle. I savor her touch, though I can't help wondering if she is taking inventory. When she reaches the nub at the bottom of my spine, the little upturning before it dives between the buttocks, she stops. I make sounds to indicate she should continue, but she is still. Then she starts to talk.

"When I was a kid, there was a boy. Joe something. He was older than I, with big buck teeth. Always popping his gum and showing his teeth. He used to get in corners and rub up against me. Front to back — front to front if I didn't turn around fast enough. It was awful."

"You just remembered?"

Absently, she touched me where she'd left off. "He had a tail."

"What?"

"A little tail. I didn't find out until later, after he had an operation to

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get rid of it. I was so happy when I heard."

"Why happy?"

"It seemed fair. Making me suffer like that, he should suffer, too."

"Is this some message, Claire? A parable?"

"It's true."

"What's true?"

She traces the scar on my flank, taking her time. "Would it have been different if Nickie had not lost his leg? I'd still be working, you still troubled and angry. Things balance out. There's a funny kind of logic to all this."

"We have money."

"I'm happy for that. But something else."

"I'm dense tonight, Claire. What's on your mind?"

"I don't know." She touches the nub at the bottom of my spine, rubbing it as if to conjure the proper explanation. "It has to do with self-respect. Knowing the measure of things. The limits."

"You can stop whenever you want, Matt. This is not for money; it's not for me or Nickie. You must know that."

"I have inklings."

"Will you stop?"

"When I'm done. Yes. I promise."

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. . .

August 8

MY FACE is bandaged so that only my mouth and nostrils are in contact with the air. Sometimes I think I am being reduced to the point that nothing will remain of me but holes. Mercifully, I am heavily drugged.

This last operation was a tough one, and it was complicated by an infection. I write this by Dictaphone, which someone, Claire probably, has left by the pillow. Kingman developed a sudden, overwhelming necrosis of his face, a result of one of the drugs he's on. The skin from forehead to chin, ear to ear sloughed off en masse. I was called in an emergency, and when I saw how he looked, the pain and fear in his eyes, I knew I would not refuse. So they brought me in and took my own face.

I am glad my eye is covered, because there are things I'd just as soon not see. Claire's look of woe, Nick's accusation and fear. I hear it well enough in their voices.

Tony called today, and, while someone held the phone, he jabbered on excitedly about an offer that promises a lot if I deliver a second book within a year. So much has happened these past months that I had to ask him the name of the book they want to buy. He laughed and told me, then asked if I thought I could write another so soon. It was my turn to laugh, a feeble sound that barely escaped my lips.

"It's nearly done."

"The diary?" he said. "You see it as a book?"

"Not that. The man. It's creation itself, Tony. Already I'm a success. Imagine, after all these years. You wait to see the door, and then you realize you've already walked through."

Someone is holding my hand. Claire, I think, though it might be Devora. Heavy sedation makes my senses less than keen.

Kingman has had a stroke. A massive one, and now his brain is dead. The news has the recurring and obsessive feel of a dream, yet all the substance and plausibility of reality.

His brain is dead.

A work of art must breathe life.

There seems only one thing left to do.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Joe Haldeman, *Buying Time* (Morrow, cloth, 300pp, \$18.95)

I'M GETTING old. I picked up *Buying Time* and thought, Wow, a new book by one of the grand old men of the field.

Then I remembered something. Joe Haldeman's *Forever War* hit the science fiction field back in the 70s the way William Gibson's *Neuromancer* did in the 80s. I remember clearly that *Forever War* won the Hugo and Nebula the same year I wrote my first science fiction story and mailed it off. This guy's only been publishing science fiction a couple of years longer than me. And I think of him as a *grand old man*!

Well, he is, in the best sense of the term. When he entered the field, he transformed it; all of science fiction is different today because he wrote. That accounts for the term *grand*. As for *old*, well, let's face it — Haldeman isn't new anymore. Even though *Buying Time* has the same truth and energy and heat that made *Forever War* such a pivotal book, a few years have passed. Haldeman is no longer writing in the age of Haldeman — he's now writing Haldeman novels in a time when Sterling and Kessel, Butler and Wolfe,

Sargent and Gibson have already changed the face of science fiction a half dozen times over.

It happens to everybody. Harlan Ellison persists in writing Harlan Ellison stories even though it's no longer the 60s; Isaac Asimov still writes like Asimov even though his style stopped being new before I was born. And someday Sterling and Kessel and such are going to be the grand old coots whose work seems vaguely old-fashioned because so many new voices have re-created the field.

So once I got over the impression that I was reading a kind of period piece, I was able to receive this novel for what it is — a first-rate action-adventure novel that revolves around really fascinating scientific ideas with heavy mythic overtones. Dallas and Maria are immortals, which means they have undergone the Stileman treatment, a complete body makeover that rejuvenates you for another ten or twenty years of life. But the Stileman treatment is controlled by a foundation that puts severe limits on the people who receive it.

The first limit is economic — the price of the treatment is everything you own, as long as you own at least a million bucks. This keeps the

wealth from concentrating in the hands of a few people who live forever; it also keeps most people from ever getting the treatment in the first place.

The other limit is natural — the treatment only lasts for a few years, and then you either do it again (at the cost of another million-plus) or die very quickly.

The story begins when Dallas is invited to join a secret group of immortals who are conspiring to run the world. Then there seems to be an even smaller, more secret group within *that* one. There's also some question about whether the Stileman treatment actually keeps you alive as long as they thought; and then some question about whether it might be able to keep you alive longer than anybody imagined possible.

Within a couple of chapters, Dallas and Maria have seen a good friend's head blown off, Dallas has had to blow away a hit-woman sent to kill him, and now the two of them are off in space trying to figure out who's running the Stileman foundation and why they're so eager to see Dallas and Maria dead.

This is the kind of story that can only be told in print. You could never make a movie of this — it would take the first hour just explaining what's going on. But once you understand it, the story takes on the kind

of headlong inevitability that comes from the best sort of fast-paced movie thriller. Unless Proust is your idea of a really exciting writer, you're going to enjoy this book.

So I must be some sort of ingrate to look this gift horse in the mouth.

(Be warned — in a vague way I'm about to give away the ending, so you may want to put off finishing this review until after you've read the book.)

This is where that redolence of a bygone era comes in. Back in the mid-70s, this novel would have taken sf a quantum leap forward — as Haldeman's fiction of that era *did*. But today, we've been trained to expect a little more. What would have felt like fascinating characterization in 1975 feels a bit thin and cardboardy now — cool sex just isn't enough to define a romantic relationship anymore.

And the ending where the villain just happens to let the heroes be alone with him and the heroes just happen to say all the right things and have all the right powers to take him out — well, we bought it then, but do we buy it, completely, now?

Probably we do; my skepticism only came after I was through reading it. Good story, thought I at the time, but did Haldeman have to settle for that old chestnut where the hero has a gun pointed at him but manages to tough it out until he has a chance

to get the upper hand? Things like that don't happen in the real world.

Such were my thoughts, I being the wise man who knows how the world works. A few days later there was a coup attempt in Panama, and the story coming out right now is that the coup leader stood there with a gun pointing at Noriega, but Noriega managed to tough it out until he had a chance to get the upper hand. Haldeman was right on the money. Things like that *do* happen in the real world.

That's the danger of falling in with new vogues in storytelling. Haldeman's old-fashioned hero story doesn't feel realistic because in the "real world," we know that the bad guy blows the good guy's head off without discussion. But then we realize that the "real world" is fiction, too, it's the version of reality that we've all agreed to believe this year, and this consensus reality is no more complete today than it was ten or twenty or fifty years ago. The new story describes part of the truth, but not the whole truth. The old stories describe part of the truth, too.

Which is why I'm glad that as each generation of sf writers passes into old-coot-hood, they still keep writing and publishing. All the old stories are still alive because of that; and if we just keep reading them, we'll come round to the point where the old stories are new again. Some-

times we'll even notice that they were powerful and true all along.

Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed* (Popular Library/Questar, paper, 279pp, \$3.95); *Dawn* (Questar, 248pp, \$3.95); *Adult-hood Rites* (Questar, 277pp, \$4.95); *Imago* (Warner, cloth, 264pp, \$19.95)

I can't read *everything*, right? So there are bound to be books I miss — and even award-winning authors whose works I have never sampled. Octavia Butler was one such. I was aware of her growing stature in the field, but whenever I noticed something of hers it always seemed to be the middle book of a series, and I thought, Next time.

Recently, however, I began to suspect that calling myself a science fiction critic without having read anything by Octavia Butler bordered on the fraudulent. For one thing, I shared a platform with her at a symposium at BYU and found her to be witty, wise, and deeply familiar with exactly the areas of science that most interest me.

For another thing, an increasing number of readers, writers, and students were telling me, "Of course, Octavia Butler already did that" whenever I came up with a bright new idea; and then, whenever I confessed to not knowing her work, they would look at me with surprise and pity.

Finally it became clear to me that

it was time to plunge in and read. The book recommended as a starting point was *Wild Seed*, a recent reprint of a book from half a decade ago. Within three pages I knew that not only was I a damned fool for not reading Butler's work all along, but also I was going to use passages from *Wild Seed* in my forthcoming book on writing science fiction and fantasy — as a perfect example of how to handle exposition of a complex milieu without slowing down the tale. And as soon as I finished *Wild Seed*, exhilarated and satisfied, I immersed myself in the trilogy *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*.

Wild Seed, like the other three, deals with human genetics, but where the trilogy is a rigorously science fictional post-holocaust novel about aliens who retrieve humanity from self-ruin, *Wild Seed* feels much more like fantasy. The main characters of *Wild Seed* are people whose genetic oddities make them virtual gods — Anyanwu, whose ability to heal and to change shapes at will has made her almost immortal, and Doro, whose one-of-a-kind mutation is not so benign.

Doro, you see, can't die. His body can, but his life essence — his soul, his identity — immediately leaps into someone else's body and takes control, in effect killing them. Since this process is involuntary, he has no choice — he can't even

kill himself; but Butler complicates things even more by making it so that possessing a new body is the sweetest pleasure of Doro's life. He not only can't help murdering people, he also can't help enjoying it.

It is a measure of Butler's considerable prowess as a storyteller that she succeeds in making Doro, not exactly likeable, but at least intelligible, even sympathetic, though of course we are as eager as Anyanwu for her to get away from him and his fascinating and unspeakable breeding program. Butler is telling us a mythic story of semi-divine heroes; yet she is also telling us a romantic tale of tragic love and a realistic extrapolation of a twisted society of people with bizarre, uncontrollable powers.

After *Wild Seed*, the trilogy was a startling change of pace. When Lilith awakens inside an alien ship, it is a struggle even to endure the presence of the Oankali. Yet because she is a resourceful woman — and, above all, a survivor — she adapts and even comes to love and, reluctantly, serve the saviors and masters of humanity.

The result is that other humans regard Lilith as a judas goat — not surprising, since she regards herself that way. For the Oankali life cycle involves discovering alien species like us and genetically melding with them, creating a new species that

combines the best features of both. Unfortunately, at the end of it all, Earth will be left as bare rock, and the old human race will be gone.

The Oankali refuse to regard this as a tragedy. After all, we already set ourselves on the road to extermination without any help from the Oankali. Indeed, they have found that self-destructive war is an inevitable contradiction within our genes. Humanity, as it is, will *always* destroy itself. From the Oankali point of view, it is a merciful act for them to allow no more old-style humans to be born. Thus Lilith is helping smooth the way for the obliteration of humanity.

Yet there *are* compensations, and as we move through the three volumes, each one unfolding the next phase in the Oankali plan and the human response to it, the moral complexity is almost overwhelming. For one thing, there is undeniable beauty and joy in the Oankali way; the new species they are creating is one that ought to exist, arguably a much-improved version of humanity. The Oankali themselves as we come to understand them, are a graceful and compassionate people. And while we have much sympathy for the defiant and violent remnants of the untainted human race, we are also more than a little embarrassed by their folly and, too often, their cruelty.

What Octavia Butler has wrought is the sort of story science fiction exists to tell. We never understand humanity better than when we see ourselves through alien eyes. Furthermore, Butler doesn't retreat from the implications of the idea that human behavior is genetically preprogrammed. Love in these books is clearly shown to be an irresistible physiological event — and yet it loses none of its power, none of its passion. Butler seems to be saying that if, in fact, heredity is destiny, then so be it — there is still something noble about human life even when it's conceived as a byproduct of the struggle of chromosomes to reproduce themselves.

I don't always agree with Butler, but she cares about many of the issues that matter most to me, both in science and in ethics, and writes about them with irresistible power. She certainly deserves the place she has won at the forefront of writers of speculative fiction — as many of you no doubt discovered long before I did.

My only quarrel with the trilogy is that she neglects several stories that I wanted her to pursue. Indeed, I hope that the label *trilogy* is wrong — I hope that there's another volume, perhaps set on Mars, perhaps in the time when the Oankali rise up from the depleted Earth and return to the stars. Each book's tale

was exquisitely complete, yet I finished *Imago* hungry for a story that would take us to the very end of everything.



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Ray Aldridge wrote "Chump Change," (August 1989) and "Steel Dogs," (September 1989). His latest story is about a prison ship in deep space, its lonely warden and its extraordinary convicts. . .

The Cold Cage

By Ray Aldridge

CLOCKS INFECT THE ship. They are everywhere, angry boils on the smooth steel walls. They claim that 271,358 standard days have passed since we departed the outermost edge of the system. The clocks also display the time that must pass before we can return: 1,343 standard years. I try not to look at that figure, but I know it by heart.

It is time for my daily tour of inspection. If I do not wish to go, the metal body in which I exist will take me along anyway. This is one of several things about my mission that I do not understand. If I am here to lend a human perspective to the ship — as I must believe — why, then, do I have so little volition? I seem to remember that once I was a forceful man. Should I one day evaporate from this cold brain that holds me, I wonder: Would anything change?

This is a foolish thought. Who would devise new punishments for the prisoners?

First I inspect the corehold, a white spherical compartment in which

the prisoners are maintained at a temperature very close to absolute zero. They float in precise rows, six up and thirty across, caught in a gauzy web of tubes and cables. They are quite beautiful. Each is sealed in a mirror-bright film, which protects the inert flesh from the heat of the lights. They are so brilliantly reflective that no details are observable. I cannot tell which body is mine.

Under the observation port hangs a telltale board; it monitors the dataflow from each prisoner's brain. Under my name burns a pink light, indicating that my cerebral pattern drives a self-contained hulk, not one of the private hells in which the prisoners exist. Also written under my name is my title: Warden. This seems less meaningful to me than the soft, steady glow of the pink light.

At the top of the board, someone has scratched a graffito into the black plastic: "... here pity lives when it is wholly dead." Dante, I believe — the right poet for the job, certainly. I wonder who scribbled the line: a shipyard worker, one of the guards who delivered the prisoners to the ship, one of the notables who came to its launching? I cannot decide whether the scribbler approved of the ship's purpose. It is an ambiguous line, taken by itself.

Now I travel the corridor that leads up to the navigation nexus. I have walked this path so many times that the reality of it has eroded a little. Sometimes I can almost see through the walls, as if the steel has gone threadbare. This is a dangerous fancy, and I thrust it from me.

In the nexus I sit beneath a hemisphere of polished crystal. I can look up into the fiery perfection of the void, my view undimmed by the haze of dust that obscures the stars in-system. I rarely do so.

The ship sails its deep cometary orbit alone. When we left the system behind, the ship spread the black wings of its hydrogen scoops, and we disappeared from the knowledge and control of humankind. I do not really remember this, not directly — it was much too long ago — but I have the sense of it. A human mind can hold only so much and remain human, and so our memories are periodically synopsisized and purged. It is essential that the prisoners remain human. Otherwise, what would be the point? Can gods be punished, or demons? Some would argue that the prisoners are already demons; but I have learned otherwise.

As we passed beyond detector range, the ship began a series of random

alterations to her orbit. Those who programmed the ship were determined and skillful; they made certain she would not be found until she came back into the sunlight. What events were chosen by the programmers to generate the ship's gyrations? True randomness does not exist, I suppose. But perhaps a lump of isotope decayed, and the ship modeled her maneuvers on these sparks of dying matter. Or she watched the heavens for signs — a new nova, a new burn. We will not be found; we will spend our allotted time out here in the darkness. Why?

Mercy is a human impulse that endures beyond grief and horror and rage and pain, and this is as much a human liability as a human glory. The prisoners aboard this ship have all committed monstrous, merciless crimes, but after five hundred years, who would remember their victims? Would some well-meaning soul wish to draw these prisoners back from their hells? "Have they not suffered enough?" that good-hearted person would say, and an expedition would be mounted to find the ship.

That can never happen. It would take a million ships a thousand years to search all the places we might be, and this would be an impractical degree of mercy.

Of course, we carry no transmitter, so we cannot call for help.

I examine the readouts. The ship functions perfectly, as she always does, and I leave the nexus.

Three of my clients require my attention. I descend through the ship to the chamber where the experiential simulators wait. On one gleaming wall is a panel with 179 sockets. I stand before it; I remove a cable from a recess in my forearm. One end of the cable plugs into the socket, the other into my chest, over the place where my heart would beat if I still had one. I touch a rocker switch on the panel. I look into Farris Niello's dream.

Through an empty gallery she paces, a small, bony woman, all angles and sharp edges. Many large canvases hang on the rough concrete walls. The paintings are abstract: they consist of tiny, fussy patterns in muddy browns; leaden greens; cold, lifeless grays. I get an impression of obsessive energy, extravagantly expended on worthless concepts. This is as it should be.

She turns, looks through me; she cannot see me. Her lean, haggard face is taut with despairing anticipation. "Oh please, this time . . .," she whispers, but there is no real hope in her prayer.

Like the others, the scope of her crime was extraordinary.

She was an artist. The critics and the public refused to see merit in her work.

On her world the harsh blue sun made cataracts a frequent and unremarkable ailment. People used an ointment to repair the injured tissue. Farris Niello contaminated a large shipment of this ointment with a feral enzyme she somehow obtained from a military depot. People applied the ointment, and their eyes dissolved; almost before they could feel pain, their eyes were dripping down their faces.

Tens of thousands were blinded permanently. Hundreds were less fortunate: the enzyme penetrated their brains, inducing a particularly ugly madness. Self-destructive impulses consumed them: they cut their own throats; they leaped from high balconies; they beat their heads against the walls until their rotting brains spilled out. I have seen the images; the ship shows such things to me whenever I grow weary of my task.

I believe that she never had any grasp of the magnitude of her crime; she is one of those unfortunates who have no imagination. To this failing I ascribe both her unsuccessful career and her unthinkable revenge. I am certain she had no idea how it would be: the screaming; the bloody, clawing hands; the faces with holes where eyes should be; the helpless staggering of her victims.

Still, should she avoid punishment merely because she is too stupid to understand the horror she committed? The answer must be no, of course.

For the first hundred years, she suffered this punishment: she was given glimpses of great beauty — wonderful paintings, marvelous landscapes, exquisitely handsome men and women. Then she was blinded, and forced to exist with these things, which, by the evidence of her other senses, she knew to be still there, beyond her grasp. The ship, as always, produced clever refinements on the basic plan. Though she could touch the textured surface of the paintings, one day she would hear a knife tearing through all that beauty. Or she would find herself living in the crisp, clean air of some alpine vista — but one day she would hear the avalanche sweeping down on her. Or one day the sweet voices of her beautiful people would go still, and soon the stench of death would thicken, and she would grope her way along the wall and fall into a mire of decaying flesh. This cycle, over and over.

Her first punishment was a flawed concept. She only *believed* that

beauty mattered to her; in truth, she was not especially moved by it. After a while she grew philosophical. This could not be allowed, so that mode changed. . . .

For six hundred years she has failed to move the critics and the public. Her "life" in the experiential simulators has been indistinguishable from her former reality. She is infected with an obsessive desire to paint; she *must* paint. She is driven by a great faith in her nonexistent talent. At intervals, when her expectations have risen to an unbearable point, she is given a show at a prestigious gallery, thus pushing those expectations even higher. On the day of her opening, her mental state is indescribable.

She suffers abject humiliation, of course. The critics who attend the opening vie with each other in dismissing her work. The ship draws upon ten thousand years of human wit in scripting these comments, and each lodges like a fishhook in Farris Niello's heart. After all these centuries, the ship knows her heart well.

But it is time for the mode to change again. Farris Niello no longer has hope; and where there is no hope, there can be no disappointment. She has become an insensate machine; mindlessly, she grinds out acres of dull daubs. We have lost our grip on her. She knows no joy, but she does not suffer. This cannot be permitted.

For weeks the ship has pressed me to devise a new torment for her. The ship shows me her crime, harangues me in a pedantic voice, and inflicts pain upon me. The pain is irresistible, and is to me another puzzling aspect of my mission. The ship calls the pain "incentive," but it seems to me that word once had a different meaning. The pain is like a live thing inside this dead body, a creature all claws and spikes that rips at my spine, my eyes, my brain, my guts. I have none of these organs, at present, but the pain finds them anyway.

I am not a brave man; I have no resources with which to resist this pain. Besides, I *do* agree with the basic premise of the mission, which is that crimes of such magnitude deserve extraordinary punishment. Truly I do. I never deliberately drag my heels when a new punishment becomes necessary. If I occasionally feel an exhaustion of creativity, the ship could make allowances. It does not.

Often I wonder what other, subtler constraints have been placed upon me. Did my thoughts always run in such cool, precise channels? Was I

The pain releases me. This is the way the ship conveys its approval.

once a man who laughed? Did I ever cry out or curse my misfortunes, when I wore flesh?

Farris Niello's body grows rigid, until she is a woman made of translucent ice. Her world shifts into the new mode. The paintings change: they take on life and verve; the patterns writhe with passion; the colors burn with portent. The paintings have become magnificent, works of genius. They are no longer Farris Niello's.

The gallery fills with ghostly figures, which gradually take on substance. It is clear that the viewers are exalted by the paintings. Now Farris Niello returns to life; she moves among the others. She is as exalted as they. In reality, she lacks the capacity to appreciate work of this quality, but the ship bestows it upon her. She is bitterly envious.

The artist drifts toward Farris Niello, smiling, exchanging greetings with her admirers. The artist is a lovely woman, tall, graceful, with waist-length hair the color of tarnished silver. She is an idealized version of Farris Niello's long-ago last lover, and Farris Niello draws a painful breath.

The artist glides up to Farris Niello. "What do you think?" she asks.

"Wonderful," Farris Niello replies. Her eyes dart from painting to artist, from artist to painting.

The artist smiles at her, a sweet, accepting smile that flows like cool, healing water over Farris Niello's tattered heart. "Come with me," she says to Farris Niello, extending her hand.

Farris Niello will grow to care fiercely for the silver-haired woman, will rise to the heights with her and plunge to the depths, and her torment will be fresh again. We suffer more for the wounds of those we love than we do for our own injuries. It is a human trait that I have exploited many times now. I wonder how many centuries Farris Niello will suffer this new pain, before her heart grows another protective callus.

The pain releases me. This is the way the ship conveys its approval.

None of this would be possible, were it not for the ingenious interface that links the frozen brains of the prisoners and the worlds built for their punishment. The brains change not at all; their only function is to provide

a constant reference point for the experiential simulators. Thus the prisoners burn forever in the fiery lake and are not consumed. But pain forgotten is no pain at all, so we remember, and we change, and this is because the ship maintains analogues of our selves in its processors. At intervals the ship purges irrelevant material, as well as material that might expose the illusion that the prisoners exist in. So existence has continuity. Our minds are like seashells, slowly accreting in this deepest of oceans, swelling with a thousand nacreous layers of pain. When the process is finished, when we have returned to the light and the prisoners' minds are at last merged with their analogues, I wonder what strange creatures will emerge from those intricate spirals.

I withdraw my cable from Farris Niello and attach it to Kaelin Mote.

Kaelin Mote is a very different sort of prisoner. He is a brilliant man, a man who thinks too much, who broods on every facet of each thought, who is not content until he has wrung it dry of meaning. For this reason he has been one of my least troublesome clients. He has for the most part punished himself; he requires only minimal assistance from me.

He was an exobiologist and administrator, and he accompanied a metacolony to a pleasant world. By his accomplishments in readying the world for terraforming, Kaelin Mote won the right to name it, and he called it Goshen.

For a few years the colony prospered, but then an accident destroyed the ultralight transceiver, and the colony lost contact with the worlds of humanity. Kaelin Mote had no reason to believe that contact would ever be restored.

He began to brood. Goshen seemed to him the most beautiful place he had ever seen, with its purple oceans and grassy blue plains and stark white mountains. The native life-forms gave way grudgingly before the overseeded terrestrials; it was almost, Kaelin Mote thought, as if they loved life with a fiercer passion than the interlopers did. He berated himself for these sentimental fantasies, but they struck deep roots into his mind. He was tormented by thoughts of what Goshen would become, when the original biosphere was gone and humanity covered every habitable place.

He finally came to a terrible decision. Over the next ten years, he oversaw the death of every one of the colonists, more than five thousand

men and women, infants and elders. I can scarcely understand how such a thing was possible, but Kaelin Mote possesses almost inhuman will and resource. He set groups against each other; he caused disasters in the food and medical sectors; he sent workers into places where fatal accidents were inevitable. He convinced the survivors that the unpopular among them were guilty, so that executions occurred. At the end he hunted the last ones down, implacable as the cruelest of gods. Somehow I am unable to form a clear mental picture of what this must have been like. Kaelin Mote is a personable man, even a charming man; surely he must have had friends among the colonists. Did he save his best friends until the last?

When, against all odds, a survey ship arrived, Kaelin Mote was a wild thing, living in a rocky crevice, wasted by a dozen alien diseases, almost dead, almost mindless. The survey crew froze him and returned him to civilization for repair. In the process of reconstructing his mind, the doctors discovered his crime.

Should he escape our vengeance because he has already punished himself so thoroughly? It cannot be.

I appear to Kaelin Mote as myself. He stands at the top of a blasted hill. He looks out over a dead, ruined landscape — sterile soil, crumbled slag, pools of fuming waste. He turns to me with a small, weary smile. "Ah," he says. "My demon. It must be time for a new game." Kaelin Mote was a religious man, strangely enough. The ship allows him to believe that he is in the hell he once feared.

Kaelin Mote is a man of frightening intelligence. He has somehow survived the destruction of Goshen, a process that has gone on all these centuries. Now he has incorporated his torment into a new philosophy: that all life is an aberration, that emptiness is the highest estate. He looks out over his destroyed world and finds it good.

"Yes," I answer. "Time for something new."

He takes my metal hand, and instantly he is plunged into his new torment. He finds himself aboard one of the Holding Arks that orbit Dilvermoon. The Ark boils with flesh. In the red illumination of the emergency lamps, it is a scene from a steel inferno. People fight for a place at the ventilator grills, for a smear of nutrient paste, for a mouthful of foul water. I release Kaelin Mote's hand, and he sinks slowly down into this ugly ocean, arms raised in hopeless supplication. His eyes bulge; his mouth opens in a scream I cannot hear above the roar of the thousands trapped here.

* * *

I detach my cable from Kaelin Mote's socket. I am moved, as I always am by the suffering of my clients. I feel a special empathy for Kaelin Mote; we are in some ways alike. I lack his genius, his terrible fixity of purpose, but I also am a brooding man. I also examine the frayed surface of my reality too closely, and this is in itself a torment.

The ship sends me pain, and I forget about Kaelin Mote.

ONE MORE prisoner must be attended to this day; then the ship will allow me dreamless rest until the next day arrives.

Demimin Anna Goere was a freighter captain, the master of the *Vigia Maru*, and she is the most difficult of all my charges. This is not because she is unusually clever or resistant to the pain I devise for her, but because I was to some extent a participant in her crime. It is hard for me to make myself believe that she is wholly to blame for the disaster she caused. I often wonder if I should bear part of her torment, for I permitted her to act. And in fact, I do share her punishment, because when it comes to punishing Demimin Anna Goere, I am indecisive and ineffectual. Therefore, the ship gives me pain.

I resolve to do better. The pain doubles me over for a moment, as if to lend strength to my resolution.

The *Vigia Maru* was transporting a levy of indentured joyfolk from Ander's End to Dilvermoon, when a disease began to spread through the cargo. It was an unusual disease. The latter stages were hideous — bleeding boils and widespread necrosis of the skin — so that the victims appeared to be animated, flayed corpses. Worse, the victims were motivated by a vast and manic energy. The first victims aboard the *Vigia Maru* turned that energy to breaking out of the cargo hold. They were near success, when Demimin Anna Goere's distress call reached us.

I was the starport governor. As the *Vigia Maru* reached a holding orbit above our world, I accepted a videolink with the beleaguered vessel.

Captain Goere was a woman in late middle age, white-haired, face hardened by exposure to many suns. Her eyes were wide with what I at first took to be dignified concern, but which later I discovered to be stark, unreasoning fear. How could I have made such a mistake? I cannot say. I was a reasonably good judge of faces; what successful bureaucrat is not? At any rate, I was taken in.

"What is your emergency, Captain?" I asked her.

A distant hammering came through the videolink. Her eyes flickered slightly. "We have several cases of Sorensen's syndrome aboard," she said, naming a dangerous but not incurable condition. "Our med unit is off-line. Repairs impossible. May we land without formal clearance? Some of the cases are nearing termination."

I remember rubbing my chin in a magisterial manner. "Our clearance procedures are not unduly rigorous. Can't you hold until we can get a med team to you?"

"No time! Look!" She swiveled her pickup to show a man and woman lying on acceleration couches. Both were beautiful: the woman had silken black hair, an appealing oval face; the man was muscled like a great cat, the planes of his face crisp and vital. Both lay still, eyes shut, breathing quick, shallow breaths, pale as ice. It was not difficult to imagine that they were near death, but later it was revealed that they were two joypersons who had come to the captain's quarters before the outbreak commenced. They helped her to pass the time, and later, carefully coached, they helped her to deceive me.

The pickup shifted back to the captain's intense face. "Please!"

Once, I would not admit that their beauty impelled me to my disastrous act of mercy. But after all these centuries, I have learned a degree of honesty. Had Demimin Anna Goere shown me the raving monstrosities that shambled about in her cargo hold, I would certainly have destroyed the vessel with a nuclear weapon before it entered our atmosphere.

But I did not. I instructed her to land her freighter on a suitable decon field, and she took the *Vigia Maru* in. She of course had no intention of going down with her ship. A thousand meters above the field, her lifeboat separated and darted away. I do not know how she thought she would avoid capture.

The *Vigia Maru* landed hard, but, unfortunately, not hard enough to kill all those within. They burst from the buckled hull, running like deer, great high-kicking bounds, as if they believed that they might run away from the disease that was eating them up. Their skins sloughed away as they ran, exposing bone and muscle and viscera. They were over the blast walls and into the city before we could react. Until I began my service aboard this ship, I had never witnessed so awful a sight.

Millions died, not only because of the virulence of the disease. In

more traditional plagues, the dying become too ill to move about. In this one the victims seemed to marshal their energies for one final effort. With desperate enthusiasm, they searched out and infected the healthy, until dehydration and shock felled them.

Of my most ancient memories, only this one is completely clear, in every detail. I survived, as did Demimin Anna Goere, and here we both are.

For the first few hundred years, the ship afflicted her with every painful condition known to humanity, and this was sufficient. I was never required to exercise my skills. She died of one grim disease after another. Between bouts she pursued health with joyless determination, to no avail. But finally she grew tired of life and tolerant of physical pain, accomplishments I envy. She has since been the source of much pain for me — and guilt, of course.

So now I must devise new torments for Demimin Anna Goere. This is difficult, because she is, I think, the weakest of the prisoners. Her mind is inelastic; I fear that if I push her too hard, she will break and somehow escape her punishment. I cannot really grasp how this would be possible, unless I have misunderstood the mechanism by which the ship maintains the prisoners, but I fear it all the same. The ship would make me suffer in her stead.

Since she has grown tired of life, I have concentrated my efforts on making her fear death and death's indignities. So far I have been only partially successful. I buried her in tropical earth, allowed her to feel each nuance of her body's descent into corruption. The early stages were properly painful. Bacteria teemed. Her body bloated, eventually split open, boiled with maggots. Liquescent flesh dripped from her bones, and she felt everything. But when her bones began to subside into the soil, I saw that she had accepted the integrity of the cycle, could even feel a certain symbolic beauty in the return of her elements to the soil that had given her life.

The ship punished me.

Now I will try again. I plan a grotesque torment; I hope it works. I have given Demimin Anna Goere to the taxidermist. She will be there for all the unpleasant things he must do to prepare her corpse for display; she will feel the flensing knife, the hook with which he will draw forth her brains, the searing chemicals he will use to prepare her hide. He will

soak her bones in a vat of acid, to clean away the dead meat; and he will drill tiny holes in her bones, so that the special ants he keeps for this purpose can clean away her marrow. And all this will be in preparation for the moment she is put on display, a steel spike piercing her torso to hold her in a lifelike position. She will stand in a museum devoted to the display of monsters, and she will endure the comments of the museum's visitors. She will explore uncharted territories of suffering.

I cannot say I am proud of my work, but at least the ship releases me from the pain.

Before I go to my rest, I feel compelled to visit the corehold again. I grip the telltale board in my metal fists, and fill my eyes with the pink glow of the light that marks my name. I tell myself, over and over, that this is *real*, that I am the warden, that I am *not* a prisoner, that I am not being forced to commit these merciless acts as punishment for my foolish mercy so long ago.

I look at the clock. It tells me that 1,343 years must pass before we can return. I think I can remember when that number was larger.

I am almost sure I remember that.

Coming Soon

Next month: "Down on the Truck Farm" by Tom Easton, an SF tale about a fascinating "organic future," along with a wonderful cover by James Gurney. Also: stories by Kim Stanley Robinson, Nancy Etchemendy and others.

Soon: New stories by Bradley Denton, John Kessel, Joe Haldeman, Wayne Wightman.

The March issue is on sale February 1. Or send us the coupon on page 36.

Delia Sherman's last story here, a cool New England fantasy ("Miss Carstairs and the Merman," January 1989) in no way prepared us for this wonderful Texas tall tale about. . .

Nanny Peters and the Feathery Bride

By Delia Sherman

NANNY PETERS? YOU ain't never heard of old Nanny Peters? My land, if that don't beat all! Well, you set yourself down right here on the porch swing, and I'll tell you about her.

Nanny Peters was half ox, half prairie dog, with jest a touch of the Rio Grande to leaven the mixture. She could hoe forty acres of beans, birth twenty calves, and set a good dinner on the table by noon, all without breakin' into a sweat over it. She had good, strong horse sense, and could tell a skunk from a woodchuck even on a dark night.

And cool! That woman was so cool, she didn't need an icehouse — she jest put the milk under the bed, and it'd keep a week or more. Why, she didn't even turn a hair when a big, sandy-white snake slithered in the front door one day, bold as brass. Nanny, she was scourin' the pots after a bean supper, and that snake sashayed right on up to her with his mouth wide open, showin' fangs like the horns on a Texas Longhorn.

Nanny hears him slidin' along on the floor (on account of the scales on

his belly, see). So she waits for him to get real close, and then she jest grabs that snake ahind the jawbone and wraps him three times around her fist and commences to scour her good cast-iron pot her mama give her. She scrubs and scrubs with that snake until there warn't a lick of crust left in the pot, and the snake didn't have no more scales on his back than a baby has on her bottom — no, ma'am. But he was madder'n a wet hen, and drippin' pizen and leavin' burnt marks on the floor and all.

Well, Nanny lets go the end of his tail and cleans the chimney with it, the snake givin' her considerable help by whoppin' around against the bricks. By the time the chimney's clean, the snake's feelin' pretty humble, what with one thing and t'other. So Nanny tells him to expect more of the same should he think to call again, and then she takes and heaves him out the back door.

Now, old Nanny Peters bein' pretty strong in the arm from hoein' and scrubbin' and such, that snake sailed smack-dab across the state and landed five miles west of Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was half-bald down the back, and all covered with ashes, and his tail was cut to shreds from frailin' it on the chimney bricks, and (on account of he'd landed on his head) his skull was all flatted out. He got better by and by, but he warn't the same snake after — no, ma'am. His head stayed flatter'n a hotcake, and his new scales grew in patchy. What's worsen yet, his tail healed in hard ridges that clattered together and kept him awake at night.

And that, jest in case you wondered, is why there's rattlesnakes.

But that's not what I set down to tell you about. Now, this here's the story, so you listen close.

Nanny Peters was a great quilter. In fact, some say she invented quiltin'. She could piece a double-size "Road to Texas" or "Tippecanoe" while the bread was risin', tack the top and the battin' and the back together while the oven heated, and quilt it solid before the crust turned brown. Something elegantifferously complicated, like "Grandmother's Flower Garden" or "Double Wedding Ring," might take her a mite longer. Her seams were so straight that people came from far away as Houston to check their yardsticks by 'em, and her stitches was so tiny you couldn't hardly see 'em, not even with a magnifying glass. And strong! My land, when the calico and battin' wore out, there'd still be little white chains of stitches left, like a skellerton, and you could use it for a fancy bed throw or maybe a pair of lace curtains.

Nanny's specialty was weddin' quilts, and this was the reason for that. Let a couple spend their weddin' night under one of Nanny's quilts, and they was set for life. Whatever kind of rip-staver a man had been before his weddin' night, he was a changed man ever after. If he'd been a boozier, he'd take the pledge. If he'd been a gambler, he'd clean forget the difference between a deuce and a three-spot. A brawler'd get religion, a spendthrift'd pinch pennies till they squealed, a layabout'd bounce to work like a cougar, and as for a ladies' man! Why, he'd rather crawl into a nest o' wildcats, heels foremost, than be caught lookin' at another woman.

This being the case, it won't come as no surprise that girls got in the way of asking Nanny Peters if she'd kindly make them a weddin' quilt. Why, it got to be that a girl wouldn't walk down the aisle until she had Nanny's quilt safely folded in brown paper and laid in her linen chest. Some Saturdays the girls'd be lined up from Nanny's front door clear to Amarillo, beggin' her for a quilt — nothing fancy, mind you, just "Log Cabin" or "Round the World" or "Drunkard's Path" and they'd wait for it, if 'twas all the same to her, seein' as the weddin' was next week. And Nanny almost always obliged 'em, providin' they was willin' to help with the cuttin' out.

But every once in a while, Nanny'd look at a girl, all bright and shy and eager to be hitched, and Nanny'd shake her head and say, "No."

Sometimes she'd say it sad, with a pat on the girl's shoulder or a cup of fresh coffee to make the "No" go down easier, and sometimes like she was too busy countin' clouds jest now, and would be so long as that girl was askin'. Some of those girls Nanny said "No" to married their men anyway, and every last one of them ended up plum ramsquaddled: dead, or so put about by their menfolk's bodaciousness that they might as well be dead and save theirselves the shame. It got so that Nanny's "No" was enough to break off an engagement, even if the couple'd been courtin' twenty years.

More than one girl tried to talk Nanny into changin' her mind, but when Nanny Peters said "No," it stayed said. Argufyin', cryin', shoutin', and bullyraggin' — none of it budged her an inch. Only one time Nanny Peters ever came a country mile near to changin' her "No" to a "Yes," and that's the story I want to tell you.'

But first I got to tell you about Cora Mae Roberts.

Cora Mae Roberts, now, *she* was one winsome girl. Pretty as a picture, with eyes like Texas bluebonnets and curls so yaller that if her bonnet

fell off while she was feedin' the chickens, you'd go plum blind lookin' at her. But only if the sun was shinin' — they warn't as yaller as all that when the sun was ahind a cloud. Her biscuits was like buckshot, her stitchin' like a picket fence, she could outscreeam a catamount, and she didn't have the sense God gave an armadillo — but every single man in the county was after her, from the widowman who owned the feedstore, to the deputy sheriff who hadn't nowhere to sleep but the jailhouse. By the time Cora Mae was sixteen years old, they was lined up five-deep around her daddy's ranch house, offering her everything from the moon to dresses from Pittsburgh if only she'd marry them.

Now, some of Cora Mae's suitors was good men, but some of them was more like coyotes on two legs. And the worst varmint of them all was one of her daddy's cowhands, a rip-tail roarer could whip his weight in wildcats and ride straight through a crab apple orchard on a flash of lightning. He was so hard he could kick fire out of a flint rock with his bare toes, and he had a thirst for whiskey would put a catfish to shame. His name was Jim Cleering, and he was the man of all men that Cora Mae Roberts wanted to marry.

Jim warn't long on patience or temperance or even on readin' or writin', but his worst enemy'd admit he was a pretty critter. He was so tall he didn't know when his feet was cold. There warn't no bunk long enough for him, but he didn't care nothin' 'bout that, 'cause his shoulders was so wide he couldn't get in the bunkhouse door anyhow, so he jest slep in the barn and scairt away the rats. His jaw was square as the jailhouse cornerstone and twice as hard. He was hairy as a bear and proud as an unbroke stallion, the yaller flower of the Texas plains. And if he warn't, there warn't a man still alive would say so.

Nanny Peters said so, though, and said it so loud you could hear it through three counties. "That man's no good," she told Cora Mae. "He's got more stalls than a good-sized stable, and if you can't see it, you'd miss a buzzard settin' on a dead cow. He'll spend your daddy's money and whup your tail until it's tough as saddle hide. Ain't a quilt around could reform that man, and that's a gospel fact."

Then she held open the door for Cora Mae to leave and the next girl to come in and say her piece.

Well. Cora Mae, she didn't think *her* piece was said yet. She wanted that man, and she wanted that quilt to tuck him up in, and she warn't

going to leave Nanny's shack until she had it.

First she cries, whoopin' and hollerin' and pourin' salt water out her eyes until you couldn't tell the difference between Cora Mae Roberts and a four-star Texas thunderstorm. But Nanny jest fetches her bucket and a couple yards of petticoat flannel for a nose rag and leaves her to it.

Then Cora Mae screams, and, as I said before, she could outscreech a catamount. On this occasion she extends herself some, and her screamin' was louder than three coyotes, two catamounts, and an entire tribe of Injuns, every one of them on the warpath. But Nanny jest rocks in her rockin' chair, sayin' less than nothing.

Then Cora Mae cusses, and I most teetotaciously hope you never hears the like of Cora Mae Roberts's cussin'. The words she said'd burn the ears right off your head and singe your eyeballs naked, for she'd learnt 'em off her sweetheart; and Jim Cleering, he had a gift for profanity. Well, Nanny sets and listens for a spell, until Cora Mae says a word made Nanny's hair jump straight out of her head, scatterin' hairpins every which way.

"Gal," says Nanny, real pleasant-like. "Gal, that ain't no way to address your elders." And quickern' a mockingbird after a fly, she takes the bucket Cora Mae's cried into and douses Cora Mae with salt water, takin' the starch right out of her yaller curls and sendin' up clouds of steam where the cold water met the air she'd heated up with her cussin'. And while Cora Mae was drippin' and gaspin' like a landed catfish, Nanny takes her broom and sweeps her right on out the door.

But that's not the end of the story, not quite.

One thing you have to give Cora Mae, she warn't no quitter — no, ma'am. She'd set her heart on tamin' Jim Cleering with one o' Nanny's quilts, and she wouldn't rest until she was sure that colt was broke to the saddle and a quiet ride for a lady. She'd do it by fair means if she could, but she wouldn't stick at foul.

So Cora Mae thought and thought until her pore brain was smokin' like a prairie fire, and then she come up with what she thought was one bodaciously smart trick. She'd wait for a full moon, and then strip herself stark naked and roll around in the hog waller until she was all caked with sticky, smelly, sandy-brown Texas mud. Then she'd stick chicken feathers in the mud, and possum teeth and a couple of rattlesnake rattles and such, and she'd creep up to the foot of old Nanny Peters's bed and plumb scare a quilt out of her.

Come the full moon, and Cora Mae Roberts was ready. She rolled in that waller and rolled in the hen litter, stuck possum teeth on her buttocks and a rattlesnake rattle in her navel, caught some glowworms and stuck 'em in her hair, and she crep through the winder of Nanny's shack and commenced to wail and moan.

"Nanny Peters. Nanny Peters. This is the magic speakin' to you," she says.

Nanny sits up in her bed and reaches for her spectacles. "Hmm?" she says. "That so?"

Cora Mae, bein' put out that Nanny ain't quiverin' and beggin' for mercy, wails and moans a mite louder. "You made a mistake, Nanny Peters, a terrible mistake, and if you don't make it right, I'll haunt you and haunt you until the day you die."

"That so?"

"That's so. And I'll give you a taste of that hauntin' beginnin' right now." Cora Mae commenced to shake mud and feathers and chicken dirt, not to mention possum teeth and rattlesnake rattles, all over Nanny's bed and Nanny's clean floor.

And what does Nanny do? Does she squeeze that girl into jelly, or knock out five teeth and one of her eyes, or tie her fingers up in twenty-three separate knots? No, ma'am. Nanny takes a double-size blue-and-red "Rob Peter to Pay Paul" from the chest at the foot of her bed, wraps in brown paper, and hands it to Cora Mae Roberts.

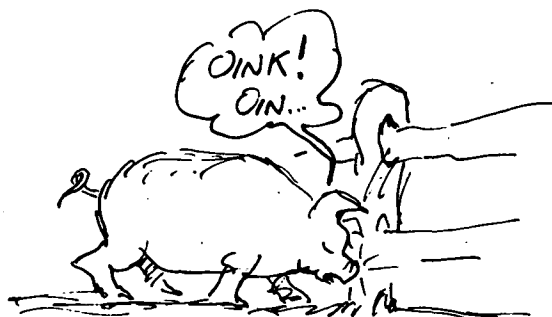
"Here you are, Cora Mae," she says. "I hope this here quilt breaks Jim Cleering for you, 'cause he's in powerful need o' breakin', and that's a gospel fact."

Two weeks later, give or take a day, Cora Mae Roberts married Jim Cleering and went to bed with him under the blue-and-red quilt pieced in the pattern called "Rob Peter to Pay Paul." Three weeks later Jim Cleering was in The Silver Garter, twenty dollars in the hole to Wildcard Pete the gambler and too drunk to find his gun when the shootin' started. Cora Mae was home nursin' a broken jaw, which didn't stop her screamin' fit to be tied when they brought Jim home on a board with a bullet through his lung.

It was mighty tragic. Cora Mae never got over it. Of course she married lots of men after Jim: marryin' was one of her weaknesses, along with whiskey and cussin'. But she took the quilt back to Nanny right away

after Jim's funeral, and she wouldn't take another one, not even though Nanny swore up hill and down dale that quilt hadn't had nothing to do with Jim breakin' her jaw and getting himself killed in the Silver Garter.

And I believe Nanny. I do indeed.



James Johnson's first F&SF story begins with the questions: What if there is only one American left in the world? What if you put him on a reservation as we did the Indians? Mr. Johnson lives in Sarasota; his most recent novel is HABU (Published by DAW).

The Last American

By James B. Johnson

O HMY GOD, Chief, I've finally found something." Gerrard Lefever looked over at his assistant. "What is it, Ten?"

Downing's fingers flew over his console. Downing preferred to be called by his given names, Michael McGilicutt, but Lefever couldn't resist "Ten." "Smith, John," Downing said. "So many of them."

"I already knew that," Lefever said.

"If he's the same one," Downing paused and looked significantly at Lefever, "I've found major disaster in his background."

"Is it the key for which we've been looking?" Lefever knew that Downing would tell him the info at his own pace.

"Gee, Chief, I'm not qualified to judge that."

"Right. What is it, Ten? Give me the gist, will you?"

"Lemme call it all up first, Chief."

Let this be it, Lefever begged his own personal god of luck. Please. So much time spent. So much money and resources. Against just one man. So

much political pressure. And, he thought, I am sick to death of fighting that one man. Gerrard Lefever swung his station around to look out the bubble-window. The view of the Grand Canyon was spectacular. He'd selected this location for his office site just last week. The week before, the office had overlooked Niagara Falls, and before that Coats Island, in north Hudson Bay. He also favored the desert of Baja California, the coast of Newfoundland in the winter, and Hawaii anytime. Anything but the capital, Chicago.

As the director of Parks and Reservations Division of the Interior Ministry of the North American Federation, Lefever could locate his office anywhere he desired. With the bubble technology, all they had to do was to install temp propulsion units and go.

He was afraid, though, that he would *have* to move to the San Antonio District, to his one remaining reservation. What a pain! That damn Smith. They still didn't know if John Smith was the old man's legitimate name, or if he was using "John Smith" as a label, sort of an "everyman" American. Talk about your resistance to change. Maybe the info Ten had discovered would allow them to confirm Smith's identity.

"Got it, Chief." Ten leaned back and smiled like he'd just solved the NYT Sunday crossword. Once, as a child, Lefever had watched some ancient videos as part of a school project. There was one in which a bear named Yogi Bear had a sidekick named Boo Boo. Ten reminded Lefever of Boo Boo. Throw in academic brilliance, though, he had to admit. But Ten Downing's lack of personal initiative, his childlike enthusiasm, and his lapdog devotion echoed the long-gone Boo Boo's. Ten was also highly empathetic. You didn't kill a butterfly or a snake in his presence.

"Are you going to tell me, or are you going to smirk all day?"

"Oh yeah, Chief, surely. Um, where shall I start?"

"Try the beginning. And punch in the remotes at the Alamo Reservation."

"Right away, Chief. You want I should track the old geezer around?"

"Yes."

Downing made his console hum like a prodigy on a piano. The wall opaqued into a screen, and the remotes at the Alamo began tracking "John Smith." As he was the only human being on the reservation, the remotes had no trouble picking up his IR signature and activating when he was in each unit's area of coverage. Additionally, several mobile units hovered in the air near him.

"Not agin," said the old man as his picture swam onto the screen. The mobile units had floated into place.

The old man spat tobacco juice on the pavement and raised his ancient M-16 and shot the frontal mobile unit. The picture went blank and shifted to a permanent with an oblique angle.

Smith spat again and began walking. He could ignore surveillance for hours or take immediate and savage umbrage at it in an instant.

Smith was apparently "doing his rounds." He walked to the bubble, glared out of the Alamo Reservation and turned and walked counterclockwise, rifle at ready. He wore Vietnam jungle boots; Confederate Army trousers, stripe and all; a naval gunner's flak jacket from WWII; and a WWI helmet. All from the museum, as was his armament. A ludicrous picture, Lefever thought, if it weren't so serious.

Lefever cursed to himself. His job would be so much easier if those damn "Freedom of—" laws didn't allow the broadcast of Smith's every move. Broadcasters had set up a channel, tapping into the government feed of the remotes at the Alamo Reservation. What Lefever and Downing watched, so, too, could the entire nation — and much of the rest of the world, if they so chose. Downing had told him that the ratings were gaining daily, as the instant psych experts reported drama peaks and predicted an end to the confrontation.

"It's on your console," Downing said.

Lefever stood and did some stretching exercises. His tall, wide frame seemed to crack up and down like the time his wrists had when he hit a hidden root with his three wood — and had to finish up almost one-handed, he recalled. What a match that had been. When a lot younger, he'd toyed with the idea of becoming a golf pro (after all, he was from *Augusta*); but a predilection for management started him in this line. "The Organization Man" they called him. By the rules, for the rules, and of the rules.

"Just give me the outline, Ten." Lefever continued his stretching.

Downing scrunched up his cherubic face. "O.K. It's gotta be our John Smith."

Lefever grunted. Downing probably unconsciously wanted approval. "You done good, Ten."

"Gee, thanks, Chief. See, when John Smith was a young man, he was married and had a kid." Downing fell silent.

"Well?"

"Jeez, it's sad, Chief. Really sad."

"Tell me," Lefever said, putting command into his voice.

"It happened in Dallas, sixty-three years, two months, and twelve days ago."

He could have just given the date. Lefever shook his head and covered the movement with neck exercises.

"John Smith was twenty-eight years old. His son was eight." A tear leaked out of Ten's right eye. "They were at a baseball game. Some sort of altercation between the kid and a man over possession of a foul ball. John Smith intervened on behalf of his son. The man spat at Smith, grabbed the kid's hand, and bit the end of the kid's middle finger. Jeez. It says here the man backed off and told Smith, 'I have the AIDS SIX strain.' Smith blanched and whipped out something called a Buck knife and cut off his son's finger at the hand." Downing took a cool-wipe from the dispenser and ran it over his face and the back of his neck.

Finally, thought Lefever. Finally some insight into Smith's character. Tragedy, early in his life. "What happened after that?"

"Fascinating," Ten said, dropping the cool-wipe into the disposal, eyes glued to his console. "The crowd was building around them, watching in horror, this tiny human drama." Ten was wont to convert governmental reports to his own viewpoint. "The man howled with laughter and said, 'I lied.' Jeez, Chief."

Lefever turned his head to watch Smith complete his rounds. The Alamo Reservation had shrunk as people left. The bubble dome had been reduced in size along with the population decline. Thus it hadn't taken Smith long to make his rounds around the perimeter. The Alamo Reservation had once covered the entire city of historic San Antonio and all of Bexar County. But as the population dropped, so, too, did the land dedicated to the United States of America (even though states were no longer involved, the inhabitants had opted to retain the name). Now the Alamo Reservation was bounded by Houston Street, Bowie Street, Crockett Street, and South Broadway. Just pavement, the buildings, and small plots of grass.

Smith stopped in front of the Alamo and punched buttons on a small console. "The Star-Spangled Banner" rang out, a recording obviously from a full military band. And slowly the Stars and Stripes rose up the flagpole. John Smith stood at attention and held a salute. Lefever fought a compulsion to stand at attention himself. He shook his head to clear it. The front of

the Alamo was less-than-impressive age-yellowed stone, four crumbling columns, arched doorway with high double doors. Cobblestones out front.

Downing was watching, his cheeks trembling.

When the last notes faded away, Smith began reciting, "I pledge allegiance to the flag. . . ."

After he dropped his hand from his chest, Smith made his way through the front doors of the Alamo, turned and faced the mob following him. "Colonel Travis went through these doors. And Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett. The company of heroes. In 1836 those Americans and others stood off Santa Anna for twelve days. Are you listening, Lefever?" He turned and continued walking. The halls and rooms were high-ceilinged, dark and dingy, the walls close together — so unlike the common conception of the Alamo. The floors of flagstones and portraits and plaques adorned the stone walls.

Lefever reflected that John Smith had held off the NorAmFed for years longer than twelve days. Lefever didn't feel up to confronting Smith today. Maybe Smith didn't feel like hassling him, either.

Smith went through the building quickly, and out the back into the courtyard. The monitors followed him into the modern facilities that had been originally designed for tourist sales, but which Smith now used for his own quarters. He stopped at the door to the bathroom. He looked up at the remote and said, "I'm sending you a personal message." He went in and closed the door. While there was a remote in the bathroom, it took a command override to activate it, and Lefever had never done so.

Downing sighed.

"Go ahead, finish it up, Ten."

"Sure, Chief. Um, it seems that John Smith jammed a cloth into his son's wound to stop the bleeding. He grabbed an ice drink from a nearby spectator and dumped the liquid, saving the ice. He picked up the, ugh, finger, and put it in the cup. His son was screaming like a scalded banshee, not understanding a damn thing and scared and wounded and bleeding and thinking his father had for no reason chopped off his forpin' finger and it was his fault for letting the stranger bite him and there was his father putting his finger on ice and this terrible black look on his dad's face and anger building like a fried cat and the crowd silenced and edging back in fear and the kid fainted right there in section 4L and Smith bends over him and ties the cloth around his son's hand so that the pressure holds

against the amputation spot and checks the kid's breathing and stands and looks at the man who'd caused all this and the man tries to run but trips over a seat back and gets up and runs up the stairs to the exit and the crowd doesn't move and he can't escape and he goes downstairs and the players on the field have stopped and are watching and security men are scrambling to get to the middle of the mess and the crowd won't let them in —"

"Ten? Slow down and breathe, all right?"

"Um, yessir." Downing stood, and Lefever was surprised at the sweat all over the young man's face. Downing's eyes remained on the console. He breathed deeply several times.

"Are you O.K. now?"

"Yes, Chief, thanks. It seems that Smith had cut off the miscreant's ten fingers, two ears, one penis, a set of gonads, and was working on the toes when security finally broke through the now terrified crowd and pulled him off."

More input for his decisions, Lefever thought. At last, something with which to work. "What was the final outcome?"

"Um, it says here that nobody would prosecute John Smith, that his actions were quote, justified, end quote. But his child was traumatized by the events and required psychological treatment for years. Attempts to reattach the finger John Smith had put on ice failed."

Lefever hung from a bar placed there for that purpose and listened to vertebrae pop. "And?"

"The wife blamed Smith, and their marriage ended two years after the incident. He must have gone with his head hanging, not understanding. What conflicting emotions must have assaulted him. What a decision he's had to live with. Jeez, Chief, that old codger we been banging our heads against did all that. Talk about instant life-and-death decisions —"

"Finish up, hear?" Lefever said. "Editorialize later."

It was the first real personal thing they'd been able to discover about John Smith. Apparently, after the episode he'd dropped out of sight, so to speak, meaning he'd gone his way and left no traces, no work records, no social security, no insurance, no subscriptions or prescriptions, no parking tickets or library fines. Until the list came out of those who refused to be part of NorAmFed, and would remain on the last dedicated soil of the United States of America. Actually, Smith wasn't on the first list. Even-

tually his name just appeared. The mystery man.

"It says here," Downing continued, voice strange and hushed, "that the man who caused all the trouble was killed by knife thrust from groin to throat one dark and stormy night. The authorities attempted to bring a case against John Smith, but, because of lack of evidence and lack of public support for the move, the charges were not pursued."

"Do you reckon," Lefever said thinking fast, "that those charges still stand?"

Downing worked at the console for a moment, and Lefever dropped from the crossbar and felt immensely better.

"Those sixty-three years ago, murder was a state crime in Texas and had no time limitations. Upon conversion to the San Antonio District of the North American Federation, the laws were uniformized, and outstanding capital crimes were allowed to remain on accounta—"

"I know why, and try 'standardized,' hear?"

"Yessir."

"But without a statute of limitations, we now have a lever we can use."

"Yessir, if you say so, sir."

Why me, Lord?

"Ten? Can you run an IR signature comparison?"

"No, sir. They didn't use the infrared technology back then. I'm running a fingerprint comparison, though—"

Let the two be the same, Lefever thought. Though he was relatively certain the knife-Smith was the Alamo-Smith. That background fit the old man's profile and answered a lot of questions.

"Ah," said Ten in a smug voice. "Finally found an obsolete fingerprint program in Washington. Working. Fingerprints match, Chief." He sat back.

Lefever knew it would have taken any other assistant hours to do what Ten had accomplished in minutes. Lefever looked at the calendar. July 4. No notations except his own question mark. He thought for a moment. "Alert the technicians that I'm thinking of relocating the office."

"Not again," Ten complained in a weak echo of John Smith. But he turned to his console, busy already.

The double ping of a "priority incoming" chimed and then repeated before Downing interrupted himself to access the call. He flipped it onto the wall screen.

The mustached face of the interior minister appeared, eyes impatient.

"Señor Minister," Lefever said formally.

"Director Lefever," the minister said. "Good of you to answer so promptly."

Sure. "Certainly, sir. In what way may I be of service this day?"

"I'm calling for a status report on that fellow on that reservation place."

"John Smith in the Alamo Reservation."

"Right."

"Status is the same, *Señor Minister*."

"It's been three years," the minister scowled.

"Yessir," Lefever said, unconsciously mimicking Ten Downing.

"The issue requires settlement."

Well, the minister had mastered passive-voice bureaucratese. "I'm working on the problem, *Señor Minister*."

"That is acknowledged, Director. However, the, uh, external situation does not improve."

Political pressure, Lefever translated. "What would you suggest, *Señor*?"

"Trank the bastard and ship his ass to Antarctica," snapped the minister. "Er, rather, I mean, have we tried money? Those types" (he meant citizens of the USA) "never turned down a buck."

"Yes, Your Excellency, I've offered him money, jobs, position, women, everything. You've got to realized a very spry, very alert nōnagenarian isn't someone who needs much of anything."

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Look, Gerrardo. They're on my ass unmercifully." The minister was more than likely referring to the president and his political hacks who watched every decimal shift in the polls. "We've got to do something. We're becoming a laughingstock."

"Call John Smith yourself and tell him your problems; maybe he'll listen and cooperate." Lefever smiled. Smith wouldn't tolerate His Excellency for more than a New York minute.

"I did," the minister managed to pout with that small mouth and large mustache. "He told me he wouldn't talk to anybody but you." The minister paused and looked at Lefever hard. "It's become a contest between the two of you, hasn't it? Just like I've suspected. *Mano a mano*, eh? A battle of wits and wills."

"Not exactly, sir." Lefever took refuge in formality.

"Gerrardo, I don't give a damn; I want it settled. That's a direct order."

"What prompted your interest this morning, *Señor Minister*?"

One man against the entire Federation. And he isn't losing . . .

Another hard look, then the minister glanced aside and thumbed something on his console. A row of figures appeared, each figure higher than the previous. "The ratings, Gerrardo. Look at 'em. The president had about five pounds off my butt because of them. The ratings for the San Antonio District have skyrocketed. It's become a David-and-Goliath story, only worse. One man against the entire Federation. And he isn't losing, which means he's winning. People are beginning to identify with him. There is some public discontent, according to the polls. Citizens are looking at Smith as a symbol of lost America. Those unhappy with the Federation are rallying to his banner, and we are suffering."

Meaning the party in power, Lefever translated.

"We've got to do something," the minister said lamely. "I want Smith out of there and that bubble dome and the damned Alamo razed immediately."

"I'm going down there now," Lefever said, "and taking personal, on-the-scene charge."

"Good. You got troops, technicians, astrologers, whatever the hell it takes."

"Yessir."

The minister waved his pointy finger at Lefever. "But whatever you do, do not violate one right of his. That's my position. We've the treaty to live by, and I'll be eternally damned if I'm gonna be the first one to defile that piece of trash, er, I mean historical document. *Comprene?*"

"Yessir."

"Look, Gerrardo, I'm aware you're so legitimate you always play by the rules. But if you resolve this *satisfactorily*, big things might happen to your career."

"Meaning if he *didn't* solve it without political embarrassment, he was a goner. "Thank you, sir."

"And another thing, Lefever, you tell that clown that works for you I know he's listening in, and if he violates a confidential conversation, I'll hang his ass."

"My assistant adheres to established policy and manners in formal situations."

"I'm sure he does, Lefever. Off."

Lefever found himself tensed up and climbed to his feet, went to the hang-bar, and hung for one minute.

After a suitable time, Ten Downing said, "We're ready to transport to San Antonio."

"Go ahead."

The bubble-transport package kicked in, and their bubble-office rose. Thrusters came on the line, and they accelerated to the southeast.

As they traveled, Lefever did some "paperwork" that had piled up, neglected, he was certain, because of his increasing attention to the Alamo thing. But he found himself watching clouds and scenery blow past, thinking of the past, and how he'd gotten into this situation.

When all the countries of North America had united, there were still groups who refused to cooperate. They'd been given refuges where they could be autonomous. "Just like the Injuns," the interior minister had lectured him one day. "Turnabout's fair play, eh?"

Gradually, the one "reservation" in Canada had lost its people, and so, too, had the odd reservation here and there throughout the continent — Boston, Boise, Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, until the last remaining reservation was the Alamo Reservation in San Antonio. After ten years, most of the diehards had to quit reservation to join family and friends, get jobs in the normal and changing world in which they lived.

Death, illness, and boredom took its toll. Eventually, in all of NorAmFed, one man alone remained on an official reservation, tabbed by the networks The Last American. A citizen of the United States, one John Smith, was the holdout.

It had been Lefever's job to edge him out. But original treaties, all nice and legal and signed and powdered and registered with the U.N. and the World Court, prevented the NorAmFed from doing anything. And John Smith would not surrender, so to speak. He was sticking it out. Meaning the Alamo Reservation couldn't be assimilated. A growing sentiment within the public was moving to Smith's side. The Alamo, The Last Stand of The Last American. An underdog. Wonderful drama, wonderful television. Smith had caught the imagination of a nation. And now that factor was showing up in political polls, making it all flow downhill into more pressure on Lefever, and, in turn, Smith. Lefever shook his head sadly. The better Smith had done for his cause — the long-gone United States — the

more pressure would be applied to Lefever.

Lefever could not see a chance in hell of a mutually agreeable settlement. Unless Smith died of old age, he amended. Fat chance of that.

He seriously considered drugging Smith's food and running him through a psych-rehab course on the sly. No! Lefever did not work that way, had never worked that way, would never work that way. Play the game by the rules. From that he would never waver.

It was noon as their bubble sat down on a cradle in San Antonio right outside the bubble-dome of the Alamo.

A single ping of an incoming call came, and Downing answered and lifted his head. "Chief. It's John Smith."

"Put it on through the remotes."

Smith's craggy head filled the screen. "Hello, Director. Is that you just landed out there?"

"Yes."

"Guess you figgered it out, huh?"

"Depends on what you mean," Lefever told Smith.

"I mean the date, Lefever."

"The Fourth of July?"

"Give the man a cigar."

"I am aware of its significance." And worry about that significance had caused him to order the move from the Grand Canyon to the Alamo.

"Good. We understand each other."

"Mr. Smith, I'd like to come over and visit you."

"Up close and personal, huh? Bring a stun gun? Aerosol drugs?"

"Not at all. I think we can reach an accommodation if we could talk face-to-face." They'd held this conversation before. With zero results. But previously they hadn't had the audience.

"And on worldwide teevee?" Smith indicated the remotes, obviously reading Lefever's mind.

Lefever smiled. "Technical glitches occur." At this moment, Downing was conferring with technicians and military commanders.

"No thanks, son. What goes on between us will require witnesses. I trust you, but I don't trust you, unnerstand?"

Lefever grimaced. He hated to do his job — hell, do anything — in front of a billion or so people. Doubtless the word would get out something was happening, and people would watch from everywhere. The newshawks

would ensure it. But if it was the only way — O.K., Mr. Smith. On your terms. Shall I come over now?"

"Not on your life, buster." He pulled out a Budweiser and punched the opening in the top. He took a long drink. "This here is sacred territory. This ground belongs to the United States of America." He stood. "Come with me," he gestured with his beer. He walked back through the Alamo. Smith stopped out front and looked up at the flag.

Lefever wondered if the old man was grandstanding for the growing audience. He could just envision it, a million new viewers every minute. The interior minister and the president would be tuned in, so they could react to whatever happened.

"Lookit, Lefever." The old man pointed up. "The Stars and Stripes. Old Glory. Prob'y the last one standing anywhere." He held his beer up above his head. "Budweiser. Red, white, and blue. I salute Old Glory. My American heritage." He took a long drink of beer. "Old Glory always stood for freedom, anywhere in the world — you know that, Gerry?"

Whatever Lefever answered, it would mean political trouble. He wished he'd mastered bureaucratese. "I've studied history," he said.

"You and me, we're gonna make history," Smith said enigmatically.

Lefever was aware of the symbology Smith was using. One lone man against billions, in front of the Alamo, toasting the Stars and Stripes. This guy was no dummy, Lefever told himself for maybe the thousandth time, and began to feel as if he were being used in some way he couldn't identify.

Smith grinned at the remote. Lefever felt a vague sense of disquiet. The Fourth of July and statements like the history one. What did Smith have in mind? Did it matter? Lefever would have to follow established *legal* procedure.

Smith came up with another Budweiser. Opened it and raised it, too, to the flag. "In the history of the world," he told Lefever — but Lefever knew Smith was now talking to the audience — "in the history of man, one thing and one thing only has stood for freedom. Old Glory. And there ain't nobody gonna take that away from me, from the world, from those brave men and women who died for that flag." He drained his beer and came up with another.

Lefever cut his audio. "Get ready for technical problems with the satellite feed," he told Downing.

Damn, something was going on, something he couldn't put his finger on.

"They'll raise hell," Downing said. "Figures coming in. One billion and change televideos on and watching us now. On this continent, that is. Don't know about elsewhere. And growing like pimples on a teenybopper."

Lefever favored Downing with one of his sour "You're strange" glares. Things were getting touchy. With all those viewers, they wouldn't buy "technical" difficulties. The entire world was sensing this drama coming to a head.

Why me, Lord?

Smith punched the outside control console, and "God Bless America" played from speakers in the background. Kate Smith? Any tie-in? No, just coincidence, Lefever decided.

Before he could turn his audio back on and continue talking to Smith, the double ping of priority incoming sounded. Downing split the screen, and the interior minister appeared next to Smith. Smith drank some beer and turned and walked off. Mobiles followed.

"Lefever?"

"Yes, *Señor Minister*?" Lefever wished he had one of Smith's Budweisers.

"I've been watching. You must do something. God, it's terrible. The ratings are skyrocketing, and the instant polls are going through the roof."

The president called you, Lefever thought, worried about the government falling. Good for the parliamentary system.

"The president called me." The minister's mustache twitched. "Not to mention half the Parliament."

Smith was now in the museum. He snapped a fresh clip into his M-16. He removed his flak jacket and slipped into a combat vest. He hung grenades upon it. Uh-oh.

"Gotta go, *Señor Minister*." Lefever cut the connection.

He reactivated the sound to Smith. "John? May I have a private word with you?"

As Smith shook his head and said, "No," Lefever's right hand activated "Command Override" on his console and killed the sound feed. He shifted the view for the satellite feed to a rear shot from one of the permanent remotes.

"John," Lefever made his voice hard. "I think I know what you're doing. It will solve nothing. I say again, it will solve nothing."

Smith looked up, "You cut me off anyway, didn't you?" He aimed his

weapon at the mobile, then lowered it. "No. That's what you want, isn't it? For me to disconnect. No way in Hell, Gerry."

"John, we found out about your son and the episode at Ranger Stadium."

Smith popped open another Bud. "You gonna arrest me for malfeasance, or what?"

"Suspicion of murder."

"Come right ahead, sir." Smith drank again. "I will consider that an invasion of the United States of America. By a foreign and hostile power."

"It will destroy the image you've so carefully constructed," Lefever said.

A quick grin. "You ain't no dummy yourself; I'll grant you that. Nope. No deal."

"Look, John, this is all personally repugnant to me, hear? I don't want to do this. But you can well imagine what those politicians in Chicago are doing right now."

"Climbing the walls and watching the ratings, I'll wager."

"Exactly."

Downing interrupted. "The *entire* forping world is screaming for us to return the proper feed."

Lefever looked at Smith. "No deal?"

"No way, nohow."

"You realize you force me into action?" Lefever knew that it had gone too far to stop this time. Though he could stop it and solve it, and to hell with the consequences.

Smith nodded soberly.

"So be it, John. May the Lord have mercy on your soul."

"Thanks, Gerry."

I cared, John, enough to end it.

Lefever restored all satellite feed.

Smith grinned a friendly, knowing grin. "Like I was saying, Director Lefever, I decline yor offer to invade the territory of the United States of America." He finished hooking grenades on his vest. He strapped on a web belt from which hung a holstered .45 automatic. His right hand came up, and his thumb and two adjacent fingers twitched, and a blade appeared from a knife. Lefever knew it must be just like the one Smith had used sixty-odd years ago.

Lefever killed his mike. "Ten? Give me the military commander."

"Yessir." Three seconds. "On the line."

Split screen again: a major general in full battle uniform appeared. His face was perplexed and scowling. "Director?"

"General, I don't want to know your name. I have command." Lefever punched in his code and "Command Override." He looked back to the screen. "Acknowledge."

"Acknowledged, sir." Very unhappy at some bureaucrat giving him orders. But he'd been assigned this task and had known Lefever could take command. "Your orders, sir?" The general wasn't good at disguising his sarcasm and resentment.

"Stand by for assault on the Alamo bubble."

"Acknowledged. Standing by."

"Ten? Set me up a mobile command unit, please."

"Yessir."

Lefever punched in a panorama shot of the front of the Alamo bubble. Troops were lining up. Armed troops.

"Director?" The general's voice.

"Go ahead, General."

"Troops in position all around the bubble. Assault force at the front. Request orders regarding armament, sir."

Lefever knew this was the moment. Decision time. His career to make or break. Smith's life. Everybody in North America calling his or her friends and neighbors to watch. Maybe a billion people watching now. Worldwide, how many? Billions more.

Don't dare make a mistake.

Like hell.

Government will fall.

To hell with them.

"General, armament will be projectile weapons. No explosives or lasers, except as needed to breach the entrance of the bubble." He thought, cover your ass, Lefever, in case you want to change your mind. "One sniper with a tranquilizer gun. Another with a stunner. Bulletproof body armor for all. Shall I repeat?"

"No, sir," the general replied with more sarcasm. But etched onto his expression was one of wonder. He didn't understand yet, and thought he was dealing with some dumb bureaucrat. But he'd follow orders; that was enough.

Lefever went and hung from his crossbar.

"Gee, Chief. You really gonna do it, huh?"

"Yes." Lefever dropped to the floor.

"Your mobile command unit is ready outside." There were tears in Ten's voice. His empathy was working overtime. And he suspected, no doubt, what would happen. As Lefever left, Downing keyed open the access panel and said, "Good luck, sir."

Lefever waved and stepped outside. A mobile command unit floated in the air, a single soldier to guide it and do the necessary chores. Lefever punched in his code and activated the unit. He strode off toward the Alamo bubble with the unit trailing alongside him.

When he arrived, he joined the general in front of the troops. He checked the screen and saw John Smith, The Last American, kneeling at the base of the flagpole in front of Crockett and Travis and Bowie's Alamo, aiming his M-16 toward the entrance to the bubble.

Lefever shored up his resolve. "General? Let us invade the United States of America."

"The Star-Spangled Banner" was playing over the feed and the speakers inside the bubble-dome and at the entrance.

"Yes, sir," the general said. He turned to an officer. "Breach the bubble, Colonel."

The colonel went to the military com circuit.

Troops advanced. Lasers went to work on the entry panel, hissing and crackling. The entrance sheared away.

John Smith fired through the breached bubble on full auto. Soldiers danced out of the way.

"Sir," the general spoke to Lefever. "You must give the order to respond fire and specify which weapons."

"I understand, General." Lefever moved forward, the mobile command unit and the general following. Troops poised outside the entrance to the Alamo.

The final strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner" faded.

Lefever walked to the entrance and inside it.

"You're crazy," the general whispered harshly and unnecessarily.

"John?"

Smith stood. "Director Lefever. You have invaded the sovereign territory of the United States of America. In consequence, I hereby declare war.

A state of hostility now formally exists between the United States of America and the North American Federation. I call on you to surrender your troops, sir, and end the hostilities. Do you so agree?"

"The Battle Hymn of the Republic" began playing loudly. Lefever felt Ten Downing burst into empathetic tears. "Mine eyes hath seen the glory. . . ."

Gerrard Lefever made his decision. To hell with politics. To hell with the audience. Give John Smith what he wanted. John was worth more than the whole goddamn bunch put together.

"I do not agree," Director Gerrard Lefever said.

"The Battle Hymn" peaked.

"General," Lefever said, "for the record. Advance your troops. Secure this dome. When fired upon, return fire."

"With which weapons, sir?"

"Projectile weapons, no stunners, no drugs, no trunks. Confirm."

"Confirmed and on the record, Director." The general looked at Lefever with a new appreciation.

The colonel spoke into his com unit.

The troops advanced, squeezing slightly together at the breached entrance to the Alamo dome.

"... truth goes marching on" was fading.

Smith lifted the M-16 above his head with his right hand. He spoke. "My name is legion. I was at Bunker Hill and Valley Forge. I was at Bull Run and Shiloh. I was at Argonne and Inchon. I served on Tarawa and Saipan. I was at Khe Sanh and Da Nang and Havana. I serve again at the Alamo. I am the Unknown Soldier. I am John Smith. I am an American. My name is legion."

He lowered his rifle and fired.

An immediate fusillade of return fire erupted from the line of troops.

John Smith fell dead at the foot of the American flag in front of the Alamo.

"Stand your troops down, General."

"Yes, sir." Full of respect.

Lefever walked forward feeling Ten Downing's empathy run through him.

The command unit followed him, but he waved it back. He walked to John Smith.

The Last American's body was punctured with many wounds. The blows so severe that instant death had precluded much bleeding — he appeared to be merely leaking blood. The grenades were plastic dummies.

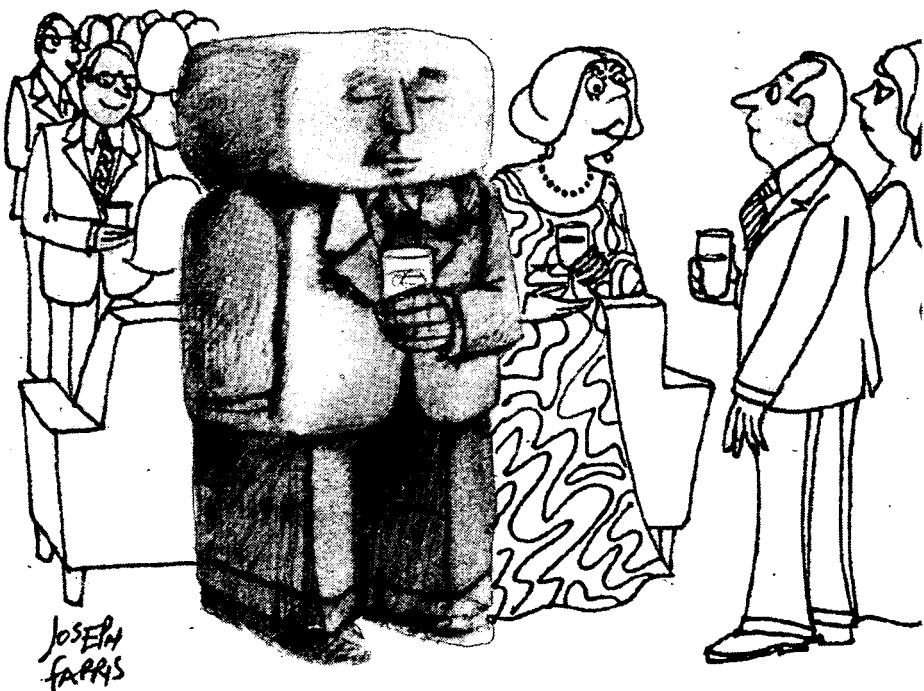
Lefever went to the Alamo's outside console. He punched in his commands. "Taps" rang out, long and lonely, the only sound in front of the Alamo. The general and his troops remained back, a respectful, silent audience.

The company of heroes, John Smith had said.

Lefever stood at attention as the Stars and Stripes lowered slowly. "Taps" continued.

When the flag reached bottom, Lefever disconnected it from the track, folded it over his arm, and returned to Smith's body.

Gerrard Lefever knelt and covered the body of John Smith with the flag.



"Elsworth is my rock of Gibraltar."

Australia's Sean McMullen ("*The Colors of the Masters*," March 1988) offers a suspenseful tale about the discovery of a window opening into whatever lay beyond death.

While the Gate Is Open

By Sean Mc Mullen

AS I WAS being driven to work today, I noticed fresh bullet holes in the walls of a plaza near the hospital, and glass from a shattered windshield in the gutter. The scars and detritus of another assassination attempt. An attempt on the life of someone so junior in the government that it had not even earned a mention in the morning news. An attempt to kill someone no more important than myself, the surgeon general.

"That's not the way to do it, *señor*, not the way at all," I whispered to myself as we drove past.

I am not a native of this small republic. I came here for the power and freedom that its violent chaos provides. By its very nature, my research requires a great deal of both.

As the car continued on to the hospital, I found myself thinking about my work in Los Angeles, and the first time that I saw Brian Muir. His eyes and nose were all that was visible amid the white windings of bandages,

and he was heavily sedated. He had been a social worker for some church group, and had been tied up by one of his clients, then shot in the mouth as he tried to talk his way out. The small-caliber, low-velocity bullet had bored a freakish path through teeth, cartilage, bone, and tissue, coming to rest in his pituitary gland.

"He has been awake several times since coming out of surgery," said Tyler, the leader of the research team that employed me. "He displays complete loss of long-term memory assimilation."

He was talking to Franklin, our electronics expert. She merely raised her eyebrows and shrugged, her usual reaction when shown a difficult problem whose solution she already knew.

"I can duplicate the function of the lost tissue as long as a good-enough surgeon is available to get in there and install the Quantum-Effect Gate," she told Tyler, glancing briefly at me and smiling. Damn the woman, I thought. I could never tell whether she was praising my abilities or mocking them. With Tyler, there was no doubt. He turned to me for the first time.

"The hospital is happy to have us try our device so long as we do not degrade his condition further. They have offered us the services of the surgeon who extracted the bullet. He will require you as an observer and adviser, of course, Dr. Hall."

I knew my place, and I nodded. Even though I had installed such Quantum-Effect Gates in the brains of dozens of monkeys, and was a fully qualified surgeon, Tyler would not trust me with an installation in a human patient.

"I've watched a videotape of his extracting the bullet," I said. "He is very good, but there are some new techniques of nerve interfacing that he would not know. I could —"

"You could instruct him," Tyler broke in, smiling. "Good. I shall arrange for you to meet him at once."

No more of that now, I thought to myself as I watched the olive-green truck of my armed escort enter the hospital gates. Here I gave the orders, and here I did what operations I pleased. Many of my assistants were so ill-educated that they had no idea of what I was doing. The others crossed themselves and presumably agonized over the relative merits of a well-paying job in this life and the chaos of retribution in the next.

Juarez phoned as I was checking the mail in my office. I paid him the

deference due to any current dictator of a South American republic, while still maintaining the firm attitude of a doctor to his patient. He was not my patient in a medical sense, yet my research has a great bearing on his conduct, and on the running of this country.

The man is terminally ill, but I have never been told just what disease is responsible. I suspect cancer or AIDS, but his body's health is not my concern. Apart from being a thief, rake, and murderer, the man is a lapsed Catholic, and the prospect of what the afterlife has in store for him has become an obsession. It is one thing to philosophically acknowledge that an assassin may strike at any moment, but knowing for certain that death is only months away is something very different. His religion holds the specter of eternal damnation before him, but I have promised him a scientific opinion.

"You are ready for an operation?" he asked anxiously.

"I have done it already, *Señor Presidente*. A priest injured by a blow from a trucheon during the demonstration last week. He will die from his injuries the moment the life-support equipment is turned off, but I made the operation seem like a heroic attempt to save him. We shall get some excellent results in tonight's experiment."

"I am sending another man, Dr. Hall. He is strong, healthy, and thinks that he is volunteering for a project that will earn him a pardon from the death sentence. Your visitor from the U.S. has brought you another of those Gate devices: install it in him today."

"But that will be murder!" I exclaimed. "When I first proposed this project to you, I made it very clear that I would use only dying patients."

Juarez could not see that I was smiling. For some time now I had suspected that he would break our agreement.

"Follow my orders," he said firmly. "I will not argue."

"But why the urgency? Why is your subject better than the man I already have prepared?"

"Not better, but worse . . . and so better. Raone is a convicted murderer, and a habitual rapist. He enjoys dominating others and inflicting pain. I had a talk with him — incognito, of course. He is without doubt a very bad man."

"I . . . begin to see," I said slowly. "How long do they say you have now?"

There was a pause at the other end. I wondered if I had gone too far.

This was not just any patient, but a man whose death would have international consequences — and who could order mine.

"Ten months. There will be a very rapid decline at the end," he admitted reluctantly. "I need to know as much as I can. When will the operation be done?"

"With a healthy patient, no more than six hours. Your man will be awake by sometime this evening."

"And well enough to question?"

"So soon? But yes, I don't see why not."

"Good. I shall arrive at eight o'clock. Have the test set up to start punctually. I want to witness everything and ask questions this time, not just watch videos later."

I took my time scrubbing up and dressing for the operation, checking all my equipment and instruments personally. The staff here are the best available in the republic, yet they are so often slack with basic procedures. Life is cheap here, and the patients who have money fly to the U.S. or Britain for treatment.

There had been no such trouble with Muir's operation, back in Los Angeles. We had the finest facilities in the world, yet even then it had taken fifteen hours to install Franklin's Quantum-Effect Gate interface in the patient's damaged brain. Most of that work was through a microscope, too, and the hospital's surgeon sensibly deferred to my experience and allowed me to do all the actual nerve connections. At the end, I reeled away to an empty ward and slept solidly for the next half day.

It was Franklin who woke me, and I noticed that she was very well dressed, and her hair was unpinned and carefully brushed. There was even a trace of makeup on her face. That meant announcements, interviews, television appearances . . . all the trappings of success. With uncharacteristic euphoria, she told me that Muir had regained his term-memory assimilation. We were famous.

Or at least, Tyler, Franklin, and the patient were famous. I had merely helped install the miracle of organ synthesis and microcircuitry that was the Gate. Even at that stage, though, I harbored little resentment for missing out on the credit. For the whole of my life, I had been considered to be industrious but mediocre. My reputation was a steel mold that I could not break — but that did not worry me; I seldom strained against it.

The Gate itself was strapped just above Muir's navel, and a bioflex

sheath took the wires and tubes past his lungs, through his neck, and into the base of his brain. A few cynics pointed out that our work was not entirely altruistic, and that the team now had a rare opportunity to study the physiology of perception and memory directly. This was true, and Tyler had an extensive program of tests planned. We could alter the rates of flow of hormones and selectively shut down parts of the Quantum-Effect Gate while Muir would describe how it felt. Our critics suggested that fetal tissue-culture implants to repair brain tissue would be better than replacing it with a machine, but Right-to-Life groups promptly entered the argument, condemned fetal tissue-culture techniques, and praised our cybernetic approach. Muir supported us, too, being very happy to have escaped a limbo where he was confined to only the past few minutes and the distant past.

It was I alone who first observed the Gate Projection phenomenon and identified it for what it was. I made the discovery under Tyler's very nose, and he suspected nothing. I had been helping him route the Gate's processor through an external computer so that he could map Muir's touch-related memory pathways. As I was cracking the seal on a hypodermic syringe, Muir suddenly cried out in pain. He had been several feet away from me, lying on a gurney with his eyes closed.

"Something the matter?" I asked as I raised the hypodermic to the light.

"Oh. Ah, I just wish you would give me some warning before you. . . . Have you injected me as yet?" He seemed puzzled, and he looked from the needle to his bare arm.

"No, but hold out your arm, and we'll soon fix that. Felt a twinge, did you?"

"Er, yeah. Just like a needle went in."

"Don't worry. Nerves can fire themselves sometimes," I assured him as I administered the injection. "Now just —"

He gave a start, and jerked his head around to the right.

"Another twinge?" I asked, with the stirrings of concern.

"I . . . I thought someone tapped me on the shoulder. It's odd, you know. In a way, I feel numb, yet I still feel as if I'm moving."

"Well, you're going to be moving now," I said, patting him on the shoulder and wheeling the gurney over to the bank of monitoring equipment where Tyler was waiting.

"That was good shooting with the needle, Doc," he said as I was about

to go. "You stabbed me right on the twinge, and it really didn't hurt at all."

It was not until twenty minutes later in the staff café that I realized what had happened. Muir had been feeling sensations from about twenty seconds in the future.

Had I been with Tyler at the time, I would undoubtedly have blurted out my conclusion at once, but as it happened, I was sitting alone, and was able to get a grip on myself and think it through. A fantastic discovery. My discovery, yet I could see an article in *Nature* as clearly as if the page were in front of me. "Tyler first noticed the phenomenon when an assistant pointed out that the subject's reaction to stimulus preceded that stimulus by twenty seconds. The conditions under which. . ."

It would be Tyler's discovery, and Franklin would share in the glory, of course. I could stand having my surgical skills ignored in favor of the invention itself, but this was different. This was *my* discovery. Damn those who actually designed and built the Gate. We remember Armstrong for being the first to set foot on the moon, and his fame is not diminished because other people designed and built the vehicles that carried him there.

I studied Tyler's notes for that day in great detail. He had routed the Quantum-Effect circuitry through an unusual pattern of nerve paths for no better reason than sheer convenience. He had simply run short of spare lines for whatever test he was doing, and had patched some paths together using the nerves from the soles of Muir's feet, his upper arms and shoulders, and his sense of balance. Had the man attempted to walk, he would probably have fallen in a disoriented heap at once, and the cat would have been well and truly out of the bag. As it was, he had done no more than lie quietly on the gurney, and Tyler had noticed nothing unusual.

Later that day I told Tyler that his patchwork routing of the patient's nerves and the Quantum-Effect circuitry was causing him numbness and disorientation. It was my opinion that a separate circuit-switching unit should be made up for that series of tests. He deferred to my opinion without fuss, and said nothing more about it. Perhaps he thought that he had been hasty, and had made some foolish mistake. His occasional visible mistakes were always admitted to curtly, then forgotten. My own errors never seemed to die, and were constantly recalled. "Don't forget the nerve surface electrolysis step, Dr. Hall. Remember the time. . . ." Even

when that time had been four years previous, and I had done dozens of flawless operations since.

Over the days that followed, I could scarcely sleep as I alternately dreamed of being awarded the Nobel Prize, and designed circuit configurations to verify my discovery. Using the very techniques that I had forbidden to Tyler, I was able to extend Muir's sense of touch twenty-two minutes into the future. Farther than that, and thermal activity in the Gates semiconductors introduced a noise factor, but I calculated that by using liquid-helium coolant, Muir's sensations could be projected twenty-five minutes forward.

All the while I had my patient sedated, and did my tests using simple electrical stimuli. It would not do for him to catch on, then excitedly tell Tyler and Franklin what I had discovered. What I had discovered. My discovery. More and more I thought of what my supervisor had said in medical school: "Go into surgery, Sig. You just don't have the imagination for research." It had always rankled, just like my brother's success. He was a great innovator, and had made a lot of money for Ford with breakthroughs in design that could be seen in every new car on the road. I made a point of driving an old-model Porsche, even though spares were becoming harder to obtain.

Nine weeks passed before I realized that I had a dilemma. How could I announce my discovery without revealing that I had deceived the rest of the team? Far from conferring glory on myself, I would be revealed as dishonest and scheming. I could pretend to make the discovery again, but then how to account for the experimental results of nine weeks? Without those results, nothing could prevent Tyler from stepping in to appropriate my discovery. Besides, I wanted to be able to have Muir fully conscious and reporting his sensations. I was recording minute bursts of neural activity in my tests, while Tyler would have Muir awake and talking. If I tried that, Muir would soon catch on, and would tell everyone. Always the obstacle of that well-meaning, innocent fool. I began to hate Muir, hate him enough to. . .

. . . kill him. If he died while the Gate was operating, he could give me a twenty-minute window into whatever lay beyond death, and would not be around later to tell anyone else. The idea was fascinating, and the more that I thought about it, the more attractive it became. I became quite excited as I laid my plans, and began to view Muir as a scientist would a

robot space probe that was hurtling toward the surface of a planet — it was vital to keep him in perfect health until the last moment, but death had to be his destiny.

It was not hard for a doctor to kill someone in his care and remain undetected. Muir was violently allergic to a certain type of muscle relaxant, and would die of shock if even a normal dose were administered. There was an orderly in the stores department who was lax about accounting for common drugs, and I had only to wait until he issued me a safe, intravenous relaxant without entering it properly in his register. Through an untraceable supplier, I had already obtained a dose of the relaxant forbidden to Muir. Muir's death would seem to be an accident, and the orderly would be blamed.

By now I was running routine monitoring sessions on Muir, ostensibly to ensure that no harmful effects were building up from the other experiments that Tyler and Franklin were doing. Nobody questioned my work, and the computer-generated nerve pathways that I used would seem harmless to even an experienced observer.

Muir was in an odd, pensive mood as I set up my equipment and rigged a pocket-sized video recorder to cover his bed. I have since wondered if he had somehow learned to anticipate the future without the use of our equipment.

"I've been wondering where my life is going, Doc," he said as I inserted a needle into a vein in his arm and attached a tube that ran to an automatic pump. The pump contained the relaxant, and a timer would switch it on some minutes later. Unless I intervened, Muir was a dead man. I strapped him firmly to the gurney.

"I would say that your life is well looked after," I assured him. "Wearing that unit strapped over your stomach is not much of an inconvenience, while the research that you help us with is unique in the world today."

"I'm a man of God, Doc. I should be out on the streets, helping people."

"But you help people here. Think of the future accident victims who would be human vegetables without the medical techniques that we are learning through you."

"But that's not me working. I'm not doing anything — don't you see? You're examining me like a dead body in a dissection room, Doc. I mean, like at the end of each day, I want to say to the Lord, 'This is what I did for you; this is all my own work.' Oh, I don't suppose you understand."

This is all my own work. Indeed, I did understand, although it was

not to God that my offering was being made.

"You understand that we are reluctant to allow you to get into any sort of danger," I said calmly, although my heart was pounding. "Perhaps, though, we could have you made a sort of chaplain in the hospital."

"Oh Doc, I'm used to dealing only with addicts and muggers."

"Addicts and muggers end up in the hospital a lot more often than the rest of the population. It could be very effective to have a streetwise chaplain in here."

"Yeah, yeah, work on them while they're forced to slow down, and are away from their buddies. Doc, that's a great idea."

He was smiling beatifically as I plugged the main computer into the unit strapped to his stomach. For the first time in my professional life, my hands were shaking. Evil is something like anorexia — the more it eats you away, the more you want of it. I switched in the computer, which had been programmed to project his sense of touch about twenty minutes into the future, but this time I had added the optic nerves as well. Until now, I had not dared, as he would certainly have guessed the nature of his new powers if he had seen events happening twice over. I taped cotton pads over his eyes, not wanting him to be distracted, and reasoning that if there was such a thing as a soul, it might make use of optic pathways as it left the body. I left his speech center and sense of hearing in the present. I had to talk to him, to know what he felt and saw.

"You may hallucinate mildly," I warned him as the seconds ticked away and his senses began to project. They would have been less than a minute from the lethal injection of the drug. "Tell me all that you see and feel, though. I may not be able to try this test on you again."

"All normal so far, Doc. You know, that chaplain idea of yours has given me quite a lift."

Twenty minutes into the future, Brian Muir received a lethal dose of relaxant.

"Heart, Doc, my heart!" he cried, straining at the straps.

"The pain's only illusion," I said, squeezing his wrists, but his sense of touch had already projected past the comforting gesture. "Tell me what you feel; tell me if you see anything."

"Pain, pain like needles in the heart. I'm scared, Doc." Drops of sweat beaded his face, and his features were drawn into a grimace.

"Trust me, Brian. I'm watching the monitors, and they all show you as

He had been dead for a full minute, yet the lethal drug had not yet been injected.

normal. The pain is just your nerves fooling you. Keep talking; tell me everything. The pain should pass."

"Yeah, yeah, the needles are going out again. Heart's so smooth now you'd think it stopped."

"If it had stopped, you wouldn't be telling me about it. How do you feel? Hot, cold?"

"I feel cool, yet sort of glowing, too. Like a dose of pethidine, yeah, and I'm floating, and I feel so good I don't want to move a muscle. And Doc, I feel happy — happy like I was the moment you said I could be a chaplain, yet that first high keeps on going."

He had been dead for a full minute, yet the lethal drug had not yet been injected into him. He was dead, but I had not yet killed him. Abruptly, I realized that I could not kill a man in cold blood, and I hastily slipped the ampoule from the automatic pump and replaced it with the one that the orderly had given me. Nothing could kill him now, yet . . . yet he had already displayed signs of death by allergic reaction! What had happened nearly three minutes ago in the future? How could he be dead?

"Things brightening up, Doc," he reported, and I quickly turned my attention back to him. I must be taking the pad off his eyes, I thought to myself.

"Very good, and does the room look normal, no tunnel vision or anything?" I asked, listening to the difference that relief made to the tone of my own voice.

"No, Doc; things are brighter, but with no up or down. There seem to be patterns all around me, but . . . sort of not quite visible, like trying to read small print by moonlight. It sort of makes sense, yet you can't quite make it out."

This was suddenly beyond my understanding. Data! I needed as much data as possible. This window into oblivion might not be open for long — if he was dead.

"Tell me everything! Do you feel afraid? Hot? Cold? What sort of colors are there? Are things drifting about, like smoke?"

"Sort of pressure on my ears, as if a drum were being beaten nearby, or

I were standing near a loud P.A. system. I can't hear, but . . . I ought to be hearing something that isn't sound, I know for sure, and it's real hard to concentrate on listening to you. In fact, I'm talking, too, but with another part of me. I feel much bigger, if you follow. I'm talking to you with a really small part of me."

This was absurd. His speech and hearing were in the present.

"But what do you see?" I insisted. "Colors? Forms? Squares and triangles?"

"Colors are not important, Doc. I mean, I can see to make what I want, and what I see are space and flows and densities. . . . That's not right, though, but I don't have the words that you would follow. . . ."

I had more qualifications after my name than he had letters in his, yet he knew that I could not follow! He had been dead nine minutes now, if the timer had contained the lethal drug.

"Getting lighter, brighter," he said, the tone of his voice becoming flat, as if he was getting bored with me. "I could think the feelings around you better than talking, but you are small, small . . . dim with guilt, hard to . . . focus. . . ."

This was not the Brian Muir of a few minutes ago. This was something very alien that was growing like the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb. Shaking with fear, I backed away from the gurney.

"Ju— just keep talking, Brian," I pleaded. "I need words to understand. Is it like special effects in space-adventure movies, or something like that?"

"No, no. . . . I'm tearing away, like a scab coming off. Hurts and tickles a bit, but all new and fresh underneath. The more that tears away, the more . . . I. . . ."

"Muir! Tell me what you feel; don't stop."

"Have to work hard to become . . . even the little bit that talks to you needed to . . . integrate here without. . . ."

"Yes? Yes? Go on? To what? Do you see God, Muir? What is there?"

" . . . killed my . . . precursor," he said faintly. His body seemed to be glowing, and I noticed sweat evaporating from his face as if he were an exhausted athlete. " . . . made you think. . . ."

I noticed that the room was very warm and humid, and there was a smell like that of a shower room after a football game. Then I heard the faint hissing, and there was a new smell: that of burning fat. Muir's body burst into flames.

Holding my breath, and with the skin blistering on my face and hands, I seized the video camera, then lunged for the door through reeking clouds of smoke and the water from the sprinkler system.

At the inquiry I was stunned to learn that the careless orderly really had dispensed an ampoule of the relaxant that Muir was allergic to, and that his death would have been a genuine accident. Would have been. The lethal dose had never been pumped into his body because it had burned first. I secretly realized that Muir had been destined to die, but some stupendous overload on his projected nerves had burned his body away before the relaxant killed him. Like relativistic effects at high speeds, it seemed to defy logic, yet relativity has a solid scientific basis.

The coroner's inquiry accepted my account of the supposedly harmless tests that I had been running. No heavy currents had been directed through the Quantum-Effect Gate, and there had been no flammable materials on Muir's gurney. Of Muir, nothing remained but dark gray ashes mixed with water from the sprinkler system. The sheet beneath his remains was burned through, and the two layers of plastic under that melted, but although the underlying mattress was partly charred, the metal base below it was not even discolored. Everything had been made of fire-resistant material.

Amid all this sensation and close scrutiny, I did not have the courage to announce my discovery of the Gate Projection. The shock of what happened to Muir had weakened my nerve badly, and I counted myself lucky not to have been directly implicated. An open finding was returned, although the coroner warned that the Gate could not be ruled out as a factor in Muir's death.

A few days later I visited Franklin at her home in the hope of salvaging some of her equipment. The house was as spotlessly clean as the set for a television commercial, and the air had a faint tinge of disinfectant to it. It reflected her personal appearance; smartly turned out, but scrubbed to the point of mania. It all confirmed my suspicion that she, like myself, was a hypochondriac.

She had been studying a copy of the coroner's report when I arrived.

"This reminds me of an article that I read in the *New Scientist* magazine years ago," she said, indicating the file on the coffee table. "It was written by a forensic officer with the Gwent police, and it described a death by fire. Except for his feet and skull, the victim was reduced to

ashes, yet the chair that he had been sitting in was only partially burned. Nothing else in the room received more than a light scorching. Nobody was able to come up with a convincing explanation."

"You're suggesting spontaneous combustion?" I asked. "That has much the same reputation as flying saucers."

"Some of the 1965 flying saucers turned out to be the SR-71's secret prototype," she said as she poured me a glass of wine.

"You think there is a conspiracy?"

"I, I wish I did. The Gate probably touched off some process we can't even begin to understand. Electronics is my field; I build equipment to other people's specifications. The Gate had to be involved, Sig, but I don't have enough biology to do my own investigations. I'm getting out of medical work, you know. An electronics lab wants to hire me to do some fairly straight semiconductor work."

It was the perfect opportunity for me, and I had trouble holding back my eagerness.

"I'm getting out of prestige medical research, too," I admitted with a studied sigh. "I'd like to work in some Third World country, where I can do some real good." I forced myself to pause, and took a sip of wine. "Still, I found our work with the Quantum-Effect Gate quite interesting, and I'd like to take it a bit further if I can find a few monkeys and some spare time. Do you have any units left that I could use?"

She looked up in surprise. "I have a couple of Gates in my workshop," she said uncertainly. "You mean to say that you actually want to do more work on the Gate? After what happened?"

"Can't find out why it happened without more work. The Gate is a superb concept, Kaye. I have great faith in your design."

She smiled with genuine surprise, squirming in her seat. It crossed my mind that she was somewhat attractive. A rather pear-shaped figure, it is true, but then, that is the very shape that my taste would have run to. Would have. I am such a hypochondriac that fear of disease precludes my having casual affairs.

"O.K., you can borrow my spare Gates," she said as she stood up. "Keep me informed if you find anything, though."

Without thinking, I followed her out into the workshop, then stopped with a gasp as I realized what covered the walls: butterfly-collection cases containing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of prophylactic devices! Franklin

had not realized that I was going to follow her out there, and her embarrassment was as severe as mine.

"I, ah, collect them," she tried to explain.

"Ah, of course. Very sensible, these days."

"No, no, I mean, I've never used them. . . ."

There was a rather long and extremely awkward pause.

"Well, as long as you don't move in high-risk circles, I suppose it's safe enough," I managed. "I, ah, personally speaking, I'm rather a hypochondriac. I've never been able to trust anyone enough to —" I realized what I was confessing to, and stopped, blushing.

She nervously thrust two Quantum-Effect Gate units into my hands, then turned to one of the cases, determined to give me a tour of the collection to hide her own embarrassment.

"This brown thing here with the bow is over two hundred years old," she explained. "And I love these Japanese ones. Each has an original haiku poem on the package. They cost over fifty dollars each."

"I suppose the idea is to make the seduction very special," I mumbled miserably.

"I — I wouldn't know, either, Sig. I'm a hypochondriac, you see. I collect these out of a morbid fascination, I suppose, but I've never used one. I've never had to; I'm too nervous to even kiss anyone."

"Oh. You mean you've never been able to trust anyone, either?" I smiled with relief, glad to find someone who understood my fears. Franklin misunderstood the smile. Very tentatively, she put her hand on my arm.

"I've watched you in the café, Sig. The way you keep your gloves on while eating, and drop purifier tablets in the mineral water. I just felt shy about, well, talking to you."

Now I was really taken aback. This was Franklin, who had always smiled at me in condescension, or so I had thought. I had never dreamed that other people could feel anything but contempt or hostility for me.

"And I have seen you wiping the cutlery with medical alcohol," I replied. "Ah, weren't you and Tyler, er, attached?"

"Not beyond going out to dinner and sitting together at conferences. The man's insufferable, always calling in other experts to check my work, and mocking me. I don't even eat with him anymore. If I try to clean a smear off my cutlery, he does things like asking the waiter for a sterilized tablecloth, or dipping a pH meter in the wine instead of tasting it."

Almost without thinking, I put the precious Gates down on a bench, removed my gloves, and took her hands in mine. Her hands were warm, smooth, and very, very clean.

Most people just don't understand," I agreed. "They laugh at us, so we hide our fears. It's so hard to meet someone else who has our concerns, one who can be trusted to be clean and responsible."

There are probably few things quite so preposterous as a pair of thirty-five-year-old virgin hypochondriacs trying to teach each other about sex. In spite of our new intimacy, I did not reveal my discovery to Franklin, however. I no longer thought that she would try to steal it from me, but I was afraid to let anyone know what I had been doing with Muir. The best course seemed to be to conduct a series of experiments with terminally ill people in some backward country. I would be relatively free from scrutiny, and could stage the operations to look like humanitarian work. Then I would announce the discovery of Projected Touch with a great display of surprise.

After some preliminary investigations, I decided that Juarez and his miserable republic met all of my criteria — that is, a powerful patron and freedom to practice some very doubtful medicine. During the course of our affair, Franklin showed me quite a lot about the practicalities of operating and maintaining the Gate, and promised to make spare parts for me if I needed them. At last I was ready. I packed my notes and my equipment, and booked a flight south. Franklin saw me off at the airport.

"Are you sure that you have to go?" she asked as I waited for my flight. "These past weeks have been, well, I'll really miss you."

"And I shall miss you, just as much," I said sincerely. By now I had come to love the woman so much that I did not want to leave. She kept pointing out how bad the sanitation was where I was going, something that swayed me almost as much as the thought of our separation. My resolve to go nearly cracked as we kissed good-bye. Now I wished that it had.

Today's operation on Raoul Raone did him no real good, but it was nevertheless a success. He regained consciousness early in the evening, and I had already made much of running a number of Projected Touch tests for the benefit of the spies that Juarez had planted on the staff. My paranoia has its uses, and I took such care in the falsification of my results that Tyler himself would not have doubted them.

Raone was ill-educated, sensual, cunning, and given to letting his passions have free rein. He did what felt good, and he did it without consideration for any other. Raone's victims had been mere flesh to consume, and no more. He was dangerous — one could sense it from his confident arrogance — but I also knew that he feared me. Everyone feared me. My staff, *El Presidente*, and my other patients. Only Juarez actually knew that I killed to look beyond death, but I was nevertheless a man who did such a thing, and it made me subtly, disturbingly different.

"So I am free to go when my head heals, eh, Doc?" he asked as I assessed my results. "My friend who knows Juarez said that I would."

"You will go free," I acknowledged, "but only after we have done all of our tests."

"You mean, there is more than the operation?"

"Yes, I have some tests planned. You will feel heat and cold, see odd colors. You must report all of this back to us faithfully. The results are very important to President Juarez and myself."

I knew what was to come; indeed, I had been leading him down a carefully determined path. It is far more effective to crush an invited attack than to do the attacking.

"I think if that's the case, you'd better make it more worth my while to report what I see," he began, but stopped when he saw the grin spreading over my face.

"It is already worth your while to be truthful, Raoul. We will be sending you very close to death, and what you tell us will allow us to adjust certain equipment to keep you alive. One inaccurate word from you, and that will be the end."

"*Santa Maria!*" he exclaimed in a voice pitched at least two octaves higher. He thought about the consequences for a moment. "I . . . do not think that I wish to go on."

"The choice is out of your hands."

"Then I want to see a priest. I have much to confess."

"Excellent. You will have no priest."

"I — what?" His eyes bulged with alarm, and he gaped stupidly in disbelief.

"Raoul, fear of damnation will keep you truthful. You will have no priest, and the Devil will be scratching at the door as we suspend you above the chasm of Hell. A single lie from you, and we cannot help but let go."

He regarded me steadily for nearly a minute. I smiled back at first, then returned to checking my tests and results.

"Devil at the door, hah! The Devil is in here already; he sits by my bedside, scribbling on a notepad."

The role appealed to me, in a perverse sort of way.

"Had I wanted your soul, Raoul Raone, I could have had it this afternoon. Right now you would be hanging by your toes over a bed of glowing coals, and your sweat would be burning fat from your soul's eternal flesh. Try any tricks during tonight's experiment, and you will be doing just that by morning. Now lie back and gather your strength. You will need it."

Juarez arrived. He showed small signs that could have pointed to a number of medical conditions: a slight tremor of the hands; a nervous tic in his cheek muscles; severe loss of weight; and coarse, flaking skin. In front of the other staff, he maintained a formal and confident front, but in my office he was fearful and distracted. He confided that he did not trust Raone to tell the truth. I told him what I had threatened the patient with an hour before.

"But, but you cannot bring him back!" he exclaimed. "I thought that the whole idea was to kill him while his soul was black with sin, so that we can watch the fate of the damned."

"That is true, but would you tell him that? Hope for life and fear of death will keep him in line."

"So . . . you lied to him," he said, relaxing again.

"I lied to him. Soon I will kill him, and unconfessed. That will damn him for eternity — at least, as far as your religion is concerned. What is a lie compared to that?"

"I, I don't care about the lie. I want only to know exactly what is happening."

"I shall always tell you that, *Señor Presidente*," I assured him. "I shall also tell you what is about to happen."

He smiled weakly, fearfully at my promise. His unease and trust were amusing, especially as he had nobody else that he could confide in, but needed to talk.

"When I was a boy," he said in a low, hoarse voice, "a nun told my class that Hell was like holding your hand over a candle's flame forever. I was a bad, tough kid, so I tried it. I must have lasted half a minute." He turned his right hand over and showed the old scar on the palm. "Dr. Hall, I can

stand pain; I can even stand the idea of ceasing to exist; but not of being burned forever — or frozen, as your previous experiment suggests.”

“So why repeat it? You have seen what happens to someone like Raone already. I still have the videotape of your minister’s death.”

“Hah! I have seen science fiction films that are much more convincing. I need to sit beside the bed as he dies, to see for myself that your Gate is not some trick of the Devil.”

I knew that when Juarez spoke of the Gate and the supernatural in the same breath he needed the reassurance of being blinded by science. I obliged him.

“The Gate is based on sound, proven science. It’s built around a device called a macroscopic quantum object, a Superconducting Quantum Interference Device, or SQUID. SQUIDs have been around since the 1960s, and can be used as very sensitive magnetometers, or as voltmeters in another mode.

“They are of great value in brain research. Dr. Franklin, my former colleague, developed a Quantum-Effect Monitor, which is a large array of SQUID systems that monitors the electromagnetic fields of data pathways in the brain. She later went on to build the Gate, an interactive version that replicates some biological functions as well. Quantum objects raise certain problems, however. Does a SQUID have a magnetic flux when nobody is monitoring it? If not, or not always, does the flux cease to exist altogether, or move to another time frame? I think that it might do the latter, and I can go into some of the mathematics involved. . . .”

“Enough, Doctor, enough,” protested Juarez, who was actually smiling again. “I am not a scientist, but I am a good enough politician to know when somebody is speaking sincerely.” Like many politicians, he liked to go on the offensive after displaying weakness, and he did so now. “One day you will have to die, Dr. Hall. Are you not worried about being punished for what you are doing, killing people to see the next world?”

“There have been several recent breakthroughs in halting the aging process, and I am only thirty-five. I may never die.”

“You may catch a fatal disease, or die in an accident.” He smiled broadly. “You may even receive a death sentence.”

“Please do not speak in riddles, *Señor Presidente*,” I said impatiently. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“You are very rigid about the choice of subjects for your experiments,

Doctor. Terminally ill patients are not the most convenient subjects to work with."

"I operated on Raone."

"Yes, but I suspect that you did so only because he was a condemned man. You would consider yourself no guiltier than the state executioner. I require experiments that cover a wide variety of people, and I cannot wait until disease or accident puts them in medical danger."

Having a strong streak of paranoia myself, I recognize the signs in other people. Juarez was in a dangerous way.

"You have shown me that not everyone shares the same fate after death," he continued. "That virtuous social worker from your first experiment blazed like the sun; yet, when my former cabinet minister died of a brain tumor, he became just a lump of frozen meat. If Raone freezes, too, it will confirm our discovery that evil souls merely cease to exist, but the good become something bright and magnificent. After Raone, we shall allow the next subject a priest before death, to see if confession and absolution can save one from becoming nothing."

"I have only two undamaged Gates, including the one that Dr. Franklin brought with her yesterday. We shall need more than half a dozen to do all that you want."

"No problem, Dr. Hall. Franklin's vacation in this country will be extended so that she can build more. You should be glad of her company, or so I am told."

I glared at him for a moment, pretending helpless fury.

"I won't have Kaye dragged into an insane murder conspiracy," I warned him.

"Ah, but I will, Doctor, and I have the power to do it."

She had arrived the day before with a spare Gate, and I had not expected the visit. The news that she brought turned out to be far more important than the package of circuitry.

"I know what happened to Brian Muir," she told me as soon as we were alone in my high-security apartment. "The Gate projected his senses forward in time, and past the moment of death."

The room seemed to sway before my eyes, and I sat down heavily on the bed that we had been preparing to climb into.

"So you found me out," I said flatly. Now it was Franklin's turn to be surprised.

"Found you out? So you *did* know!"

I stared back, puzzled, and she sat down beside me and put her arms around my shoulders.

"Sig, there's a bright young Canadian mathematician who has been doing some exciting new work in quantum theory. His latest paper predicts that certain quantum states can be influenced by events outside our time frame. I recognized certain similarities with my Quantum-Effect Gate's behavior, so I started checking the configurations that had been used in our work with Muir. The computer archives show over a dozen that might have induced some sort of time-projection effect. I've done some very simple experiments that confirm it."

"And what does Tyler think?"

"Tyler! He's the last person I would tell. The man interviews well, and he would be out there in front of the television cameras with his bow tie and blow-waved hair before you could say Quantum-Effect Gate. He would claim the credit, and it's my discovery."

My discovery, I nearly echoed. "You ought to publish, and quickly," I said instead. "There may be others working in the area — me, for example."

"I nearly did, but I suspected that you had discovered the phenomenon independently. You, a surgeon, with little training in physics, electronics, or even neurochemistry. Sig, I . . . I tried to send a paper of my own out for publication, but it would not have been fair to you. I was so proud of you; I wanted to share this with you. I thought that you might like to pool your results with me and publish a joint paper. Have you done any new work?"

I tried to make a carefully censored confession of what I had done, but somehow the entire story came tumbling out. I also told her about my illicit experiment with the dying cabinet minister. Instead of seeing colors and patterns, then burning up, he had reported nothing but cold and darkness before he stopped speaking. His body had then frozen solid, its temperature dropping so low that thick hoarfrost had formed on the skin. The implanted interface of the Quantum-Effect Gate had been damaged by hysteresis phenomena normally seen only below the condensation point of helium.

I also told her about Juarez, and how he would not let me stop the work now.

"Even if I escaped from the country, he could denounce me publicly,

accuse me of murder. Believe me, Kaye, I may have done some very unethical things, but I am not a killer."

"Sig, Sig," she sighed, cradling my head in her arms. "If only you had stayed with me; if only we had talked earlier."

"Paranoia has its uses, but there are drawbacks, too," I said.

We lay awake for most of the night, talking mainly about that small, cloudy window past death itself. I had shown that there is a type of existence there, and that only certain people could achieve it. Perhaps they become part of some greater consciousness. Would that consciousness atrophy and die if work on aging reversal led to a serum that brought immortality in this life? Should we care? Could we communicate with it?

Kaye lay half across me, weighing so heavily on my skimpy frame that I had trouble breathing. I would not ask her to move, though: I hungered for as much contact with her as I could get. I did not resent her duplicating my discovery. It would have been easy to get Juarez to silence her, but there was no point. Love made me want her to share it all. Juarez. He knew about her, and that she could be of great use to us. I realized that I had become dangerously protective toward my only friend and lover.

"If I knew that I had a week to live, Sig, I think that I would volunteer for an experiment like yours," she whispered as the warm darkness gave way to dawn. "There is nothing criminal in the idea — it would just take the authorities awhile to adjust, and give their approval."

"This isn't Los Angeles, Kaye," I reminded her. "The authorities are the criminals here, and the highest authority of all wants to steer my work in the most unspeakable directions. I thought that I was like the Devil tempting Faust when I first approached Juarez. Now I find that it was really the other way around. He wants me to experiment with people of his own choosing, people who are not terminally ill."

She held me so tightly that I gasped for air.

"What can we do?" she moaned softly. "Try to escape from here, then deny any public accusations that Juarez makes against you?"

"And you, perhaps. I have a plan, but it's dangerous for me. If . . . if I die, and you go on to publish a major paper, please put in a line for me. Something like, 'The phenomenon was first noticed by Dr. Siggurd Hall, who called it to the attention of the author.'"

"I'll mention a lot more than that, love. I don't just trust you in bed; I really care for you."

She cared for me. Someone actually cared for me. Her gentle whisper had just condemned Juarez to death.

"If I were to die," I began.

"I'd think of you, Sig, and I would not wish for a long life."

The experiment with Raoul Raone is set up in a modified cold-storage room in the hospital basement. Because I will be there with him, Juarez thinks that he will be safe. The room has been searched for weapons, and he is satisfied that it contains only life-support equipment, a patient, and the Quantum-Effect Gate's peripherals and computer. He is quite correct.

We enter, and the guards wait outside, slamming the heavy door behind us. Juarez pointedly checks his machine pistol as I check the patient — whose face is unrecognizable beneath the bandages. My patron walks across to the door, which has been altered to unlock only from the inside. He satisfies himself that it is indeed secure, and that we cannot be interrupted. The catch is a spring-loaded lever, and a very bad design. The full weight of my body is barely enough to release it. Juarez has wasted away to a much lower weight than myself.

I set a timer to turn off the priest's life-support system only twelve minutes in the future, then switch the computer link to the Quantum-Effect Gate. The unconscious priest is a good and kind man, one who was willing to give his life for the peasants in his parish. Like Muir, he will blaze like a thermite bomb, fill the room with choking fumes, and consume all the oxygen. Juarez may be able to grope his way to the door before he suffocates, but he will need my help to release the catch.

Juarez asks why Raone is not awake. Raone is six floors above us, his head smothered in bandages and his bloodstream full of tranquilizer. I tell Juarez that the patient is being kept sedated until the last possible moment, and that the experiment will begin in ten minutes, when I have completed my tests.

I think of Kaye Franklin being showered with honors for our discovery. Our discovery. As far as the media and public are concerned, it will be *her* discovery, but as long as she knows the truth and is proud of me, I do not care what anyone else thinks. I wonder if this newly born altruism has made me different from Raone, Juarez, and the cabinet minister. I hope that it has, and that I shall continue to exist — and perhaps not be too alien to remember my lover when she eventually dies and joins me. I shiver, although the air has suddenly become warm and humid.

Do you ever feel nostalgic for the days of sunbathing without sunblock #25? Then count your present blessings and read about Grania Davis's sun-scorched world of 2093 and the adventures of the Solar Emergency Squad.

Doctor Sunspot

By Grania Davis

THE SUN IS Your Enemy, read the emblem on the cruiser. Doctor Sunspot knew he looked like a crocodile in his guardian gear. He slipped on the therm-scaled khaki caftan and hood, and the mask with its insulated long breathing snout and photosensitive goggle-eyes. Doctor N. Sunspot enjoyed looking like a crocodile.

The blipper muttered and sputtered as he slicked the Sol-shielded cruiser out of the burrow. A gang of young moon-hikers had lost their way in the cremated hills that surrounded the entombed Urban Unit. The pups were caught outdoors postdawn — sans guardian gear. Silly brain-deads. Exposure to summer sunlight was suicidal in the ozone-depleted greenhouse world of 2093. They had to be tracked and treated for sun-scorch — soon.

Severe sun-scorch does nasty things to the unshielded human body. Have you ever seen a sun-dried lizard by the side of a road? Doctor Sunspot slicked his land-air cruiser toward the distress blips, over a bonked land-

scape of sparse and weirdly overgrown weeds. Within an hour he found the strays in a field of giant thistles. The hikers had sensibly buried themselves in shrouds of cindery earth. They bawled and stumbled into the cruiser, where Doctor Sunspot dosed them with ionized fluids and soothing dermat-rays.

They weren't fatally scorched, but there would be some scarring and permanent discoloration, vision loss, and risks of later malignancy. Doctor Sunspot calmed the panicked pups with euphorants and encoded his report. He advised dermat-implants, and lifting their moon-hiking permits for topside retraining.

The Sun Is Your Enemy, read the emblem on the blazing shell of the cruiser. Doctor N. Sunspot slicked toward the shelter of the shadowy burrow, which entered the buried city called Urban Unit 12.

The urban orifice was surrounded by the squalid crypt-towns of Edgers. These indigents weren't trained for slots down in the city. They subsisted in grim topside basements covered with mounds of earth, like old-time opal miners in the scorched Australian outback. They slept through the feverish days, and came out at night to scavenge among the ruins of *Eden* — the era before the searing greenhouse shift. Doctor Sunspot was too young to recall Eden, but elders enjoyed recounting their luscious lives in that lush land.

A hiker in the tail of the cruiser bawled at a blur in the viewer. Doctor Sunspot sighted an infant Edger crumpled near one of the mounts. He trained the viewer on the shriveled female body, which was fatally scorched. Had the wretched child wandered into the summer sun while her clan slept — or had they exposed her because they lacked precious rations and water? Infanticide was common among the desperate Edgers. Grievors protested, but the fertile agro-tunnels of the city were already overstressed. There was no room or resources for surplus Edgelets.

The cruiser returned to the cool shadows of Urban Unit 12. Doctor Sunspot admitted the hikers to the Scorch Center for treatment, and signed off-duty. He stripped his crocodile gear, and washed his coppery skin with filtered seawater. Southern Indian genes once gave his elders natural solar shields in the balmy Eden era.

Now fresh water was far too scarce for bathing, but salt water was all too plentiful. As world temps soared, the polar ice caps melted, and there were wild winter storms. Low-lying coastal zones flooded, and inhabitants

migrated inland. Urban Unit 12 was dug into hillsides, above shallow and oily canals that drowned parts of San Francisco. Sunspot's dorm-mate worked for Project Atlantis diving teams, which salvaged materials from submerged streets. Some Edgers were also ultradivers. They bartered their treasures for fresh rations from the enriched agro-tunnels that circled the Urban Units.

"Let's flow to Le Café," said Doctor R. Sunray as she stripped her crocodile gear and wrapped a short, flowery sarong around her waist.

Both worked as doctors for the elite Solar Emergency Squad, and their names were encoded to reflect their slots, with individual initials. Divers for Project Atlantis had code names like L. Seashell, and agro-tunnel ranchers might be encoded as F. Beansprout.

"Le Café . . . onward," said Doctor Sunspot, resting a sinewy copper arm on the pearly skin of her shoulder. There were no natural solar shields in her pale Anglo-Slavic genes.

The hatch of Le Café emitted mood-enhancers. Within was a swirl of seminude bodies wrapped in gaudy sarongs and tinted with prismatic light . . . dancing and drinking, dining and discussing in polyglot jargon. Dr. N. and Dr. R. settled into a secluded booth.

The table was inlaid with a viewer showing a travelogue of midwinter polar tours. These were very popular among urban dwellers in well-paid slots. From November through February in the Arctic, and from May through August in the Antarctic, the climate was crisp and cool, there was little lethal sunlight, and tourists could ski and romp topside in refreshing snows of dim-lit winterlands.

"Next holiday let's flow to the North Pole," said Doctor Sunray.

"No holidays this year — if Professor Nonym of the Overground Rebels keeps brewing toxic DNA Sunblock."

"Maggots; I saw a horrible case yesterday. A whole clan of Edgers used that ghastly stuff so they could scavenge during the day. Their skin thickened and hardened and darkened . . . thickened and hardened and darkened until they looked like rhino. The mutation of their hides continues — and there's nil we can do. The children are immobilized like hideous melons in a thick and livid rind."

"Why do the brain-deads use it when they know it's maxi-risk?" demanded Doctor Sunspot.

"It isn't omni-risk — 80 percent of Edgers tolerate it. Their skin

forms a protective leathery crust, so they can go topside in early-morning and late-afternoon sun, sans scorching. The Edgers are frantic to forage in daylight, so they barter treasures for Sunblock."

"Somebody will profit off anybody's misery — it's natural law," grumped Doctor Sunspot. "I suppose they finance the Overground Rebellion with DNA Sunblock."

"Professor Noname and the Overgrounders claim they're helping the Edgers, by giving them solar protection they need — and by rousing rage in the crypt-towns. After 20 percent of their clans turn into grisly walnuts, the angry Edgers might blast underground and take out the Urban Units," said Doctor Sunray.

The viewers showed a jingly and rose-cheeked tourist couple in cozy sweaters, laughing and throwing snowballs at high noon on a refreshing January day — while an impotent sun hovered limply on the Arctic horizon.

"No polar holiday for the Solar Emergency Squad until we blip out DNA Sunblock," said Doctor Sunspot.

His words were echoed by his blipper. "Doctor N. Sunspot here," he said.

"Chief L. Sunstroke here," replied an ashen voice. "We've got a nasty — a max-nasty. Director K. Shogun's son, age six, went out moon-hiking with his workout group, and didn't come back."

"Sunray and I will track him in the cruiser. Where was he lost?" asked Doctor Sunspot.

"He wasn't *lost*," said Chief Sunstroke. "The Overground Rebels snagged him. They're threatening to expose him in full noon sunlight tomorrow — *with only DNA Sunblock for protection* — unless we supply fresh water and rations to all the Edgers in the local crypt-towns. We must track the pup — but *where?*"

"Yikes!" said Doctor Sunspot.

"Yikes, indeed," said Chief Sunstroke. "How much do you two know about this toxin?"

"I've info-scanned," said Doctor Sunray. "Apparently the DNA Sunblock stimulates cell multiplication in the basal layers of the epithelium, and the production of melanin granules through a biphasic DNA interaction. That's what causes the skin to thicken and darken into a leathery crust. But in some people the genetically endowed number of surface

basal cells is greater than normal. This allows an almost explosive uptake of the active biochemicals, and causes a chain reaction of cell multiplication. The skin keeps hardening and thickening and darkening into a horrible necrotic rind, until cardiac arrest and death occur."

"Is there any antidote?" asked Chief Sunstroke.

"Not yet, but the bio-labs are decoding it."

"Any chance they'll break through before noon tomorrow?" sighed the chief of the Solar Emergency Squad.

"Nil," said Doctor Sunray.

"Brain death! How can we track the pup out in that inferno?"

"Let's start on the islets in the bay — the former hills of San Francisco. The Snoop Squad reports that's where the Overground Rebels dig in. Sunray and I will slick the cruiser out to the islets," said Doctor Sunspot.

Doctor R. Sunray eyed her flowery sarong and her barely chomped hot ration supper wistfully. "Maggots," she said.

As Dr. N. Sunspot and Dr. R. Sunray rose abruptly from their booth, the tourist couple waved a jingly good-bye, and threw wet Arctic snowballs at the viewer.

The Sun Is Your Enemy, read the emblem on the cruiser. Dr. N. Sunspot and Dr. R. Sunray of the Solar Emergency Squad slicked past rusted girders of partially flooded bridges, out to the islets surrounded by shallow and meandering canals. These blobs of dry land, topped with ruined pyramids and towers, were remnants of the submerged Eden city of San Francisco.

They cruised around Telegraph Islet, crowned by the ruined shaft once called the *Coital Tower*. The historical scan said it was erected to honor "firemen" by a woman named "Coit" — but info was heavily censored in those prudish days. San Francisco was a wild and hedonistic city in Eden era, and the phallic shape of the tower clearly symbolized weird orgiastic rites.

The cruiser shuddered slightly as it bonked dry land, and slicked out of the oily water into rubble and ruins. It was past midnight, and shadowy scavengers wandered among the abandoned buildings. They foraged through piles of debris for treasures to barter for water and rations, while thin winds blew dust and refuse around their ragged forms. Clanlets huddled in the shells of houses, and burned rotten lumber torn from walls. They cooked crabs that fed off garbage in the canals and brackish bay that

drowned the city. Sunspot and Sunray could see cookfires flicker through shards of window glass that jutted like broken teeth.

Were they merely miserable Edgers who slept in hidden holes on the islets by day, and came out to fish and scavenge at night? Or were these the Overground Rebels who had snagged Director Shogun's six-year-old son?

"One way to scan," said Doctor Sunspot. "Let's ask."

The cruiser slicked to a stop outside the sagging remains of an antique gingerbread house. Debris smoldered in the Victorian brick fireplace, where a squalid clan of men, women, and pups hunched over cooked shellfish and the contents of rusty food tins. Their skeletal bodies and heads were sheathed in motley layers of colorful old leather clothes, sewn together into rudimentary protective gear. The effect was jingly — the people in the ruined house were not.

This became clear when Doctor Sunspot spoke into the blipper: "This is the Solar Emergency Squad of Urban Unit 12. Tell Professor Noname of the Overground Rebels that we are here to barter."

Sunspot and Sunray fretted for a response, which came in a hailstorm of rusted food tins bonking the cruiser. Some tins leaked rotting contents, and a film of green slime slid over the viewer, followed by a spatter of red and yellow ooze.

"Nil rebels," said Doctor Sunray as the cruiser slicked away. "Let's adios these mucous minds and snoop the other islets."

But before they could bon voyage, a tall and brawny apparition approached them through the blowing dust . . . with a tangled ruddy beard, and a mass of stringy reddish curls dangling down his back. He wore only a multicolored leather sarong and boots, and protective goggles that protruded like fish eyes. Around his waist was a metallic death belt, dripping lethal toys. His skin was a shockout; it was no longer human flesh. It had the color of a bruise, and the texture of a thick brute hide. The monstrous man had successfully shielded himself with DNA Sunblock.

He stood boldly before the cruiser lamps, and gestured at them to follow. They slicked behind him toward the ruins of the Coital Tower. Beneath the ruins was a burrow that led to a rebel anthill. People moved briskly in and out of the tunnel carrying scavenged treasures — people whose hides looked like bruised elephants.

Beneath an overhanging shelter huddled some who didn't move briskly.

Sunspot noted that their skin had folded into rough plates like armadillo armor.

Indeed, they didn't move at all; they merely whimpered. Their flesh resembled cracked purple melon rinds — they had not successfully evolved through DNA Sunblock. Their skins couldn't absorb the chemical at the proper rate, and the drug ran wild through their bodies, with hideous results.

Doctor Sunray felt her stomach twist, and was glad she hadn't chomped her supper. If they couldn't barter the release of Shogun's son before dawn, the poor little pup might end up like these pre-corpses — or at best like this topside horror with a hide of heavy purple leather.

The brute stopped at the burrow entrance and shouted something unintelligible. A gang of men and women with similar shockout features and fashions joined him. Sunspot noted that their skin had folded into rough plates like armadillo armor. In their crude way, these topsiders had tried to adapt to the catastrophic climatic shift. But thoughtlessly and recklessly, without careful scanning of the toxic effects and how to avoid them. In sensitive scientific hands, this could be a step toward the future. In the ponderous paws of these rebels, it was an evolutionary death march.

Their gruesome guide shouted something, and Sunspot and Sunray strained to understand him. The thickened skin around his mouth apparently blurred his speech. At last they snagged his meaning.

"Professor Noname here. If you want to barter, come out! Come out where we can scan you. Come out of that metal shell, and we'll talk together like humankind."

"Yikes," said Doctor N. Sunspot.

"Maggots," said Doctor R. Sunray. "If we leave the cruiser, they'll strip our crocodile gear, and drag us somewhere to bake — and maybe douse us with DNA Sunblock. . . ."

The lanky, leather-complexioned woman who stood beside Professor Noname slurred to him with a sunblocked drawl, "If they leave the cruiser, we can strip their crocodile gear, and drag them somewhere to bake — and maybe douse them with Sunblock."

"But what about the pup?" asked Doctor Sunspot.

"But what about the pup?" drawled Professor Noname.

"I'll fetch the pup," slurred Noname's leathery companion. "That'll blast them out of their cozy cruiser."

Six-year-old J. Shogun-minor had a runny nose and runny eyes, and clearly wanted to run — except, his hands and legs were bound.

"Poor little pup jingles my bio-alarm clock," said Sunray. "Let's flip the cruiser hatch — and barter."

The stench of rotting refuse, dust, and smoke was brain-bonking, despite their filtered croc snouts. Sunspot and Sunray emerged from the cruiser into the warm and windy night.

Shogun-minor began to bawl when he saw them. Leather-lady shook him and slurred at him to hush. So Shogun-minor bawled silently, with running nose and eyes replacing running pup feet.

"N. Sunspot and R. Sunray here," said Doctor Sunspot.

Professor Noname laughed, with a thick and guttural grunt. "You don't scan me?" he asked. "Recall when you were both pups in biolab."

Sunspot and Sunray peered through their croc goggles at the leather-plated colossus that stood before them.

"Professor V. Biosphere!" cried Sunray.

"That was my slot-tag, yes," said Noname. "But I abandoned the name along with the parasitic slot."

"But why?" asked Sunray. "You were the brightest research prodigy and sensei in Urban Unit 12."

"I was *maxi*-bright for Urban Unit 12," slurred Noname. "I scanned the biosphere and tried to guide endless series of smug student-pups. You two were ultra, I recall. I explained how the industrial gases of Eden caused a mutation in earth's climate. Levels of carbon dioxide, caused by burning fossil fuels and deforestation, more than doubled between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. Methane and nitrous oxides also belched abundantly. These gases snagged heat and reflected it back to earth, so world temps rose more than twelve degrees Fahrenheit during the past century. The winter storms and searing summer droughts were disasters. Entire ecosystems died, and the polar ice melts and floods swelled the sea nearly twenty feet in some places. Adios, New Orleans and Manhattan, Calcutta and Shanghai, Miami and Seattle, Amsterdam and Venice. Meanwhile, maxi-burps of fluorocarbons, from refrigerators and deodorant sprays, bonked the atmospheric ozone shield — and the gentle sun became our lethal enemy."

"Why didn't you retain your slot to play with these puzzles?" asked Sunray. "Why lurk up here among the Edgers?"

"Because I had to do something!" thundered Noname. "I was bored with abstract riddles. I was sick of selfish and self-satisfied students. While I still had the strength to survive up here, I had to show the Edgers how to cope with the catastrophe."

"So you joined the Overground Rebels — and developed DNA Sunblock?" asked Doctor Sunray. "But why snag your fury and frustration on the pup? Shogun-minor didn't bonk the biosphere. He's six years old, and it's not his blame! Let the poor pup flow home with us in the cruiser."

At the sound of his name, Shogun-minor's silent bawling grew to an audible whine. Leather-lady shook him and drawled at him to shut down.

"The pup is nil blame," said Noname in a weary slur. "But his father is director of Urban Unit 12. We need time — and we desperately need fresh water and rations — until I can perfect the Sunblock. Open the agro-tunnels to the Edgers . . . and take the pup."

"You know the agro-tunnels produce only enough to feed those in urban slots," said Doctor Sunspot.

"I know that the agro-tunnels, with their controlled and carbon dioxide-enhanced environment, produce maxi-growth and maxi-crops of grain and vegetable chomp. There's plenty to feed the privileged urban slots — and the hungry Edgers. I know it, and so do you."

Sunspot, Sunray, and Professor Noname faced each other in an impasse, while Shogun-minor whimpered.

Sunray realized that her eyes drooped with fatigue behind her croc goggles. The weary night had passed, and the cruel summer sun began to sear the eastern horizon beyond Emeryville Bay. "We can't stay out much longer, even in croc gear," she murmured to Sunspot. Reluctantly, they retreated into the shelter of the cruiser.

Professor Noname stood like an unrelenting monument. His massive arms folded across his livid leather-plated chest, and the sunlight blazed on his long tangle of curly reddish hair.

The Edgers who weren't protected with DNA Sunblock vanished into their anthill. Shogun-minor tried to shield his eyes, and bawled out loud, "No sun . . . no sun!"

"Maggots, the pup will fry out there," said Sunray.

Doctor Sunspot touched the control-unit to close the cruiser hatch —

then it was his turn to bawl. While they tried to barter with Noname, a rebel crept into the hatch and sabotaged the controls. The cruiser was disabled, and they were snagged in a sweltering metal oven like baking crocodiles.

Sunspot tried to blast up the starter, the viewer, the blipper. Sunray rummaged through the control unit thermware, trying to restore power. But their efforts were nil. The cruiser was silent as death.

"Professor Noname! Let us and the pup into the burrow, where we can barter," Sunspot shouted through the hatch.

"The time for barter is pow," thundered Noname. "All I can offer you and the pup is DNA Sunblock."

"Yikes," said Doctor Sunspot.

Then something appeared in the sky and slicked down beside them. It was Director Shogun's cruiser with the rising-sun emblem. Shogun and his armed escorts had followed their coordinates.

Professor Noname drew a bonk from his death belt.

"Release my son, Biosphere, or you'll be blasted to ash," Shogun belled into his blipper.

"Slick off, or your cruiser is pow," slurred Professor V. Biosphere/Noname.

Doctor N. Sunspot and Doctor R. Sunray sweated and stared. The pup bawled loudly, and nobody could make him hush.

The cruel sun rose like a flare.

Then something in the smothering air shifted. The direction of the dusty wind abruptly changed, and a brisk breeze blasted in from the ocean . . . bringing wasps of gentle gray summer fog through the Golden Gate. The wisps thickened to cool clouds of cotton . . . which blotted out the sizzling sun. Despite the climatic mutation, the soft summer fogs still sometimes swathed San Francisco Bay.

The pup was silent, and Professor Noname looked up and glared.

"My bio-clock is ticking like a time bomb, and I'm going to explode," said Sunray. She jumped out of their bonked cruiser, swooped down and snatched up the cowering pup, and dashed to Shogun's rising-sun cruiser.

Leather-lady tried to tackle them, but Noname hailed her to halt.

Doctor Sunspot said a microprayer to the elder gods . . . and followed. Shogun flipped open the hatch, and they bounded aboard.

Professor Noname lowered his bonk with a defeated glower as the

rising-sun cruiser rose into the gentle fogbank and hovered overhead.

Doctor Sunspot shouted into the blipper, "Come with us, Biosphere. . . . Come back to your slot. We saw you unleash the pup. We'll work on the Sunblock together. We've got all the rations and lab toys you need to scan the absorption rate."

"And after it's perfected, will you release it freely to the Edgers who need it, or will you snag it for your smug and selfish selves, like the agro-tunnel crops? Nil. I'll stay topside, where the real puzzles must be unraveled. . . ."

"So be it," shrugged Doctor Sunspot as they settled into Director Shogun's sleek rising-sun cruiser. "We've got the pup. Let's slick home to Urban Unit 12, strip this sweaty croc gear, and flow to Le Café for mood-enhancers and hot rations."

Professor Noname wistfully watched them blast into the swirling fog. Then he stalked stiffly to his bleak burrow with a defiant, leather-plated stride.

Six-year-old Shogun-minor thoughtfully chomped a sweet ration stick and peered into the viewer. "Why does that monster man look and act so funny?" he asked his father.

The director laughed jingly. "Because he lost his slot," Shogun explained to his son.

The Sun Is Your Enemy, read the emblem on the rising-sun cruiser as they slicked back to entombed Urban Unit 12.





SCIENCE

I S A A C A S I M O V

BUSINESS AS USUAL

I LOVE GIVING talks, but I can't give as many as I would like. For one thing, the business of my life is writing, and I cannot sacrifice too much writing time for the pleasure of talking — even at the high lecture fees I routinely extort. In the second place, I don't like to travel, so I don't accept engagements that are more than a few hours distance from my home, especially in the winter months.

But if the talk is close to home and comes at a time when I can spare an evening, I refuse to turn it down simply because I don't know anything about the subject. After all, I can always brush up on it quickly, and since I like to think of myself as a person of infinite resource and sagacity, I am always sure that I can think of some approach I can handle.

Thus, it came about earlier this year that I was asked to give a talk on the future of "smart cards."

I drew a complete blank. Smart cards?

However, the fee was right, the place was right, the time was right, so I had no intention of refusing. I wrote the people a letter and said, "I'll be glad to oblige, but tell me — What are smart cards? Cards that play poker by themselves?"

I was promptly deluged with material on the subject. Smart cards are objects very much the size and shape of credit cards, but are so thoroughly computerized that they carry enormous amounts of information about you and your affairs and can greatly simplify the financial transactions you might wish to undertake.

That was a relief. After all, I had written a brief essay on the subject back in 1975, strictly out of my head. I just didn't know the things were called "smart cards." So I gave the talk with confidence, and it was successful, I'm glad to say.

In the process, though, I had to

do some thinking along lines I had not previously dealt with much, and I would like to share some of those thoughts with you, for what they're worth.

Suppose we start by considering at what point in history human beings became human beings.

From the biological standpoint, that may have come about as early. They were the first organisms to qualify as "hominids"; that is, as creatures that more closely resemble modern human beings than they resemble apes, living or extinct.

We might wonder why we should give the australopithecines the honor of human relationship (if honor it be), when they were somewhat smaller than modern chimpanzees, with brains no larger and with a life-style not much different.

There was, however, one important difference between australopithecines and apes that made up for everything. The australopithecine spine was bent backward in the lumbar region, as ours is, and from that and from what the surviving hip and thigh bones tell us, we are quite certain that the australopithecines walked erect as easily and as comfortably as we do.

Apes, bears and other creatures can get up on their hindlegs, but it is an uncomfortable and temporary stance for them. With hominids, it

is permanent. Furthermore, unlike such bipeds as birds, hominids have saved their forelimbs from overspecialization and have made them into manipulative appendages of marvellous delicacy. The upright stance and the possession of well-developed hands with opposable thumbs separate hominids sharply from all other Earthly forms of life, living or extinct.

That's all very well, but every species has its own adaptations, some of them remarkable indeed. Viewed by an impartial observer, the adaptations of many nonhominids might seem more noteworthy than the hominid spines and hands.

When, then, did the hominid way of life develop to the point where the difference between hominids and nonhominids became an astonishing cultural gulf and not merely a matter of biological minutiae?

The easy answer to that, and the one I've always given, has been that the difference arose with the use of fire.

As far as we know, the use of fire is at least 500,000 years old, and the first to use it were members of *Homo erectus*, a relatively small-brained ancestor of ours.

The use of fire makes the distinction satisfactory. No group of modern human beings (*Homo sapiens*, has, as far as we know, been

without the use of fire. On the other hand, no other species of living thing, alive or extinct, uses or has ever used fire, or had anything to do with it except to run from it if it could.

Can we go further back, however? Is there anything prior to the use of fire that we can use for the hominid/nonhominid distinction?

To be sure, human beings use tools, but so do other animals. Chimpanzees can use sticks. Beavers build dams, spiders build webs, birds build nests, and all of these things might be viewed as tools.

Even the most primitive hominid tools were probably more elaborate than any nonhominid tools, I'm sure, and we might try to make a distinction between instinct and reason, but this is shaky ground. As far as the use of tools is concerned, we may be dealing with differences in degree rather than in kind.

Even if we try to define the hominid attribute as tool-making, rather than tool-using, it might still be a matter of degree. Beavers, to some extent, have to shape the logs they use. Chimpanzees strip leaves from a twig before using it to catch termites and so on.

About 2 million years ago, however, the first organisms had evolved who were hominids sufficiently like ourselves to qualify for placement

in the genus *Homo*. They were *Homo habilis*, and with them came the development of stone tools. More than that, they apparently *shaped* the stone tools in very primitive fashion.

Now sea-otters use stones on which they break the shell of the molluscs they feed on, but they use unmodified stones. *Homo habilis* was the first species ever to *modify* this resistant material. It may be, then, that stone-working is the first cultural or technological development that draws a firm line between hominids and all other forms of life.

At this point inspiration struck me, and I came up with an idea that, as far as I know, is original with me.

Prior to stone-working, hominids surely used tools and these consisted chiefly of bone and wood, each of which is far easier to modify than stone is. Such tools, however, presented no problem. They were available to all. Anyone could obtain a long bone by chewing away the meat around it, and anyone could break a branch from a tree. There is no particular skill involved in chewing or breaking.

When the time came, however, that hominids were deliberately manufacturing bits of rocks with sharp edges or points, objects that

could then be used for various useful purposes, the question of "skill" arose. After all, some people were bound to be more skillful at stone-working than others, which meant that some people were bound to have more and better stone tools than others.

Now if one hominid had a bone or a tree branch, and another one did not, the deprived one could always get one of his own that was just as good. Bones grew in animals and branches grew on trees.

If one hominid, on the other hand, had a good stone tool and another did not, and if the deprived one lacked the skill to make a satisfactory one for himself, what could be done about it? The one deprived might try to take the other's tool by force, or to steal it when the owner wasn't looking. Either way, there was going to be a fight and a lot of hard feelings and bruises.

There must have come a day, then, when a man without a stone tool managed to get hold of some food and must have said to a man with tools, "Look, you have five cutters. You don't need all five. Give me one of them, and I will let you have all this food which I have worked hard collecting and which you will be able to eat without having had to do any of the work." (Naturally, we assume he said all

this in whatever kind of grunts and gestures *Homo habilis* used.)

When, where, and how it was that this first happened, we don't know and can't tell, but we can be sure that at some time well before the discovery of fire, hominids had begun the practice of barter, and this was the invention of "business," so to speak.

Barter, even in its simplest form, is a tremendous advance. It tends to even out the resources available to a group of people. By trading, each person can make use not only of his own skills, his own work, his own luck, but also the skills, work and luck of others. Each person involved in bartering gives something he has little need for, in exchange for something he has much need for, so everyone gains.

This is something completely new in the world of life. A male bird feeds a female bird incubating her eggs, a mother protects its young, one monkey grooms another, but these are inflexible behavior patterns and seem qualitatively different from barter.

The deliberate use of barter to increase the general standard of living, involving, as it does, reason and judgement, is a strictly hominid invention, and it may possibly be nearly 2 million years old. The art of stone-working and, even more so, the development of business

would thus seem to be the moment when hominids became something special and unprecedented in the history of life.

The invention of business meant that there were now two forms of interaction when two groups of hominids happened to cross each other's path. They might fight, each trying to establish ownership of the territory on at least a temporary basis. Or they might do business, since each side might possess something the other would covet.

Undoubtedly, fighting was the more traditional and the more likely of the two alternatives, but as technology developed and as individual groups of hominids found themselves with more valuable objects in greater variety, the chances of business increased.

We might generalize and say that throughout the development of culture and civilization, there was always the choice of destructive or constructive interaction between social groups — war or trade — and that, on the whole, the constructive interaction must have won out since culture and civilization have grown continually more elaborate and versatile — at least up to now.

The gradual (and perhaps heart-breaking slowly) predominance of the constructive alternative not only allowed technological advance, it actually made it inevitable. The

needs of trade encouraged travel and a broadening of horizons, for the greater the area over which barter could take place, the larger the pool of resources that could be spread out and evened, and the higher the standard of living that resulted. I don't say that people *deliberately* brought this about through far-sightedness; it was just the natural result of continuing to seek self benefit through trade.

Why would anyone develop rafts, for instance, and then boats. To go sailing on a river and have a good time? Why would people build roads and develop wheeled carts pulled by donkeys? To bet on races?

No, boats and carts were devised only for the purpose of travelling up and down rivers and roads, to trade and transport goods. Even in the very early days of civilization, bits of amber from the Baltic sea-coast found their way to the Mediterranean, and pottery from different areas scrambled themselves widely up to the limits of the relatively advanced areas and even beyond.

As civilization advanced, those who benefited from its technology and enforced discipline learned to use that to fight off the uncivilized hordes outside, who preferred to take rather than trade. And even when the "barbarians" won out and enforced a breakdown in business

transactions that brought on a decline in the standard of living, they themselves quickly learned that this was not a desirable situation. With surprising quickness, they adopted the civilization of those they had conquered. In this way, win or lose, civilization spread outward until it covered the world.

However, civilization could not advance far on the basis of barter alone. Barter had the effect of raising the standard of living generally, but it had its disadvantages, too. (Everything does!)

The objects being bartered are digital, for instance, and involve things that are not easily divisible or comparable. Is a goat worth three chickens or four chickens? Maybe it's worth three and a half but a half-chicken doesn't lay eggs or reproduce. And if barter involves pots or sickles, for instance, then half a pot or half a sickle is totally useless.

It is perhaps inevitable that in many barter arrangements, both sides end up feeling cheated. That must be why, in the ancient Greek myths, the god Hermes is the god of merchants and also the god of thieves. When I was young and totally innocent, that puzzled me. Now that I am old and slightly guilty, it occurs to me that the clever Greeks failed to see any distinction between the two lines of endeavor.

In modern times, for instance, we might invent the great god Whereas who might be the god of lawyers, and also the god of connivers. Or the great god Sniff-Sniff, who would be the god of critics, and also the god of fools.

But I digress.

Fortunately, by about 3000 B.C., metals were well known in the Middle East. There were gold, silver and copper, all of which could be found free as metallic nuggets, or could be easily obtained from appropriate ores. There was also the copper-tin alloy called bronze. These metals were much desired. Bronze was hard enough to be superior to stone as a material for tools and weapons. Copper, silver and gold — particularly gold — were highly ornamental, and could easily be worked into a variety of fascinating shapes. The desire for ornamentation is deeply ingrained in the human psyche, and so the possession of metals, particularly gold, was coveted.

Gold is beautiful beyond question. It is very rare so that getting even a small amount is unusual and is a cause for great self congratulation. In addition, it is indestructable if left to itself. It doesn't rust, melt, fade, or lose its luster in the slightest.

What's more, gold is not digital, but analog. It can come in all kinds of weights. If a piece of gold is

broken in half, each half continues to have half the original value.

It would be sensible, then, to barter a tiny bit of gold for a large ox, let us say. The gold is not only much more portable, but its weight can be slightly adjusted up or down, so that you don't have to try to decide whether it is worth three whole goats or four.

Although gold has no value in itself, aside from its use in ornamentation, it is of infinite value as a way of facilitating trade. There is no question but that the invention of a "medium of exchange," and "money," had a catalytic effect on business. The existence of gold and its movements back and forth, therefore, raised the standard of living and inevitably brought about changes that advanced the level of culture and civilization.

But the gold had to be used. Thus, the pharaohs of Egypt had themselves buried with all sorts of golden treasures and did so with the greatest of precautions against tomb robbers. However, every last pharaoh's tomb was quickly robbed, even that of Khufu at the center of the monstrous "Great Pyramid." (The tomb of Tutankhamen escaped by a fluke, but never mind that.)

When I was young and innocent, I felt indignation over the tomb robbers, but as I grew older I recognized them as the saviors of civiliza-

tion. The removal of all that gold from circulation would have devastated the economy of Egypt and the rest of the ancient world. The tomb robbers, by restoring the gold to circulation, performed an act of heroism, for I need not tell you what happened to them if they got caught.

Of course, there were still inconveniences. Merchants and traders had to carry around balances to weigh the gold. The balances had to be honest ones, with arms of equal length. The standard weights used had to be of correct value. The use of dishonest weights or balances would once again blur the distinction between a merchant and a thief. What does the Bible say? "A false balance is abomination to the Lord: but a just weight is his delight" (Proverb 11:1).

In the eighth century B.C. came another important invention. The kingdom of Lydia, in western Asia Minor, placed the matter under governmental regulation. They issued small discs of gold of guaranteed weight and stamped them with that weight and with some royal symbol to indicate honesty. In short, they invented "coins."

Away went the balance, and, to an extent, the suspicions of crooked weights and measures. Once again trade and business was encouraged and prosperity grew. Lydia benefited enormously by the invention, and

its last king, Croesus, grew so wealthy that "as rich as Croesus" is still a common catchphrase. Naturally, the use of coins spread rapidly throughout the civilized world.

Governments can themselves be dishonest. There is always the temptation for a ruler to try to save money by adding less valuable metals to the gold coins and for paying off his debts with coins worth less than face value.

This sort of thing would, however, invariably boomerang. As people grew reluctant to accept the cheaper coins, trade languished, business fell off, the economy suffered, living standards declined. The government was then forced to debase the coinage further, making things ever worse.

On the other hand, those nations that managed to keep up an honest coinage had their coins greatly desired for the purpose of trade and business. They then remained economically strong, despite the vicissitudes of war. The "bezants" put out by Constantinople and the "ducats" put out by Venice are an example of honest coins put out by nations that remained prosperous over long periods of time.

There is some inconvenience in the fact that gold has an intrinsic value. Even if the government issues honest coins of honest weight,

individuals might clip off tiny portions along the edges and save them. Eventually, they would accumulate enough gold shavings to represent a consequential sum — stolen from the people, generally. Governments had to mill coins, placing tiny ridges along their circuits, so that clipping a coin would be too obvious to get away with.

In general, every advance leads to ingenious methods of stealing, which are countered by ingenious defenses, met by more ingenious crookedness and so on indefinitely. Again, on the whole, despite our cynical tendency to believe otherwise, honesty wins out, or civilization and culture would not have advanced as they have.

In the Middle Ages, the Church's strictures on usury (lending money at interest) served to keep the economy in ruins after the fall of the west Roman Empire. Without usury, there would be no loans, and business would be choked down with the usual bad effects that followed. The Jews, who were not affected by Christian views, kept the economy creeping along through their work as money lenders (the only gainful employment allowed them by pious Christians), and their reward for this was to be viewed as Shylocks.

With the Renaissance, the Ital-

ians were finally forced to choose between business and holiness and they chose the former. They established banks which lent money at interest, and which became connected with each other by letters of credit. The Italian business tycoons then had money enough to patronize art, and that kept the Renaissance going.

China, during the Middle Ages, had invented the use of paper money (not the metal stuff that people were used to, but promises to pay the metal stuff on demand). That gradually spread to Europe.

Paper money further increased the ease of doing business, at least as long as people trusted the ability of the government to redeem the paper with coinage on demand. However, while there was a finite amount of gold, there was an essentially infinite amount of paper. Governments could almost never resist printing up endless reams of paper bills with which to pay their debts on the assumption that the population would never demand redemption in great numbers all at the same time.

However, as the paper money supply rises, there is invariably an increasing reluctance to accept the increasingly worthless promises of redemption. More and more of the paper is demanded before a sale can be made (in the hope that with

enough paper, a fair amount of coinage can be obtained). In other words, there is inflation, which can reach catastrophic proportions.

And there is also the problem of counterfeiting, which is fought by making the bills ever more complicated, which in turn forces the counterfeiters to ever higher flights of ingenuity.

Refinements have continued right down to the present. It has become common for each individual to have his own supply of paper money, not in fixed denominations, but in any amount he wishes. The paper money is in the form of checks, made out to the penny, which become valid only on signature. It is clearly easier to write out a check at need, than to walk about with a huge wad of bills.

Of course, the check is, once again, merely a promise to pay in "real" money on demand, and people hesitate to accept a check from a stranger, since he or she might not have the bank account to redeem it with. (And there's also the problem of forgery.)

Things became still simpler with credit cards, where one's ability to redeem the amount is more easily checked, and where one ends up having to write only one check a month.

Now we have smart cards.

In fact, we no longer have to exchange money physically, not in the form of cows and chickens, nor of gold and silver, nor even of paper money and checks. We now have the capacity to carry through transactions electronically, by making controlled changes in symbols. The flow of business has become easier than ever.

Since electronic transactions can be carried out at the speed of light, the whole world has become a single business unit in which any transaction anywhere by people separated the full width of the planet can be carried through in seconds.

What started as simple primitive barter, then, a device that spread the resources of a few individuals to the benefit of those few, can now (at least potentially) be a device for spreading the resources of all the world to the benefit of all the world.

Does this mean we are now living in a Utopia? We should be, but there are still problems. Even if we place to one side (for now) the physical problems such as overpopulation and overpollution, we find enough trouble just in the act of money handling.

The less developed portions of the world can, for instance, borrow

money easily (albeit at high rates of interest) on the supposition that the money will be used to develop the resources and economic structure of the nation, thus enriching it and enabling it to pay off the loan and to improve its standard of living as well. Instead, the money is all too often diverted, through corruption and incompetence, into the pockets of a few, leaving the land poor and with a debt load it cannot possibly repay.

Then, too, as the economic structure of the world becomes more complex, there is always the temptation for unscrupulous individuals to take advantage of their positions of power and influence to enrich themselves at the expense of the public generally. This means we have influence peddling in Washington and insider trading in Wall Street.

That leaves us now with the matter of the future. Will the destructive influences finally win out over the constructive ones and will civilization and culture at last collapse? Or is there a way out and what might that way out be?

If my courage doesn't leak away in the interim, I'll try to deal with such questions in the near future.



Alan Brennert is a television writer — most recently for *China Beach* — and occasional contributor ("Healer," February 1989). His latest is a gripping fantasy about a mysterious singer with a remarkably ardent following.

SEA CHANGE

By Alan Brennert



VIOLET DUSK WAS DESCENDING on Mykonos town, a brief moment of color on an island usually dominated by the white of its cubist buildings and the dun brown of the surrounding hillsides; residents wash these walls twice every day, and only in their trim — the pastel blue of a doorway, the pale green of a balcony or banister, the vivid red of a church cupola — were brighter hues permitted. Yet that was exactly what made Mykonos so beautiful: during the day the bleached-white buildings blazing in the sun made the deep red of window shutters all the more striking; a small dinghy, its hull a dark red, its gunwale and interior a bright aqua, seemed all the lovelier for sitting on a tan stretch of beach, sand the same color as the rocky hillsides, or the wooden trim of shops and restaurants.

Tonight I sat at a small table in one of the larger tavernas along the harborfront, nursing an ouzo and staring out at the fishing boats rocking back and forth along the crescent-shaped bay, lights atop their masts

snapping on about the same time as those in buildings all over the town. Blue-black waves slapped soundlessly against the docks; in the distance a motorboat put out from one of two huge cruise liners anchored in the bay, but there was no roar of engines, no rush of water as its bow cut through the foam. Gulls swooped silently across the surface of the water; tourists by the dozens hurried past the open-air café, seeming to glide noiselessly over the cobbled walks, their mouths opening in pantomimed laughter and wordless chatter.

I suddenly became aware of a waiter standing close by, stepping into my field of vision; I imagine he'd been trying to get my attention for some time. I looked up, catching him in mid-sentence.

— *vradinó, kirie!*

I don't lip-read Greek all that well, but I gathered he was asking if I wanted to order dinner. I was on my third ouzo, and any thought of food was still remote. I shook my head, the waiter nodded, looking annoyed, and I decided it was probably time to move on. I left two hundred drachmas on the table and joined the hundreds of tourists crowding Akti Kam-báni, the esplanade fronting the tiny harbor. It felt even stranger here, in their midst, than it had watching them; I couldn't even delude myself, however briefly, that the three ouzos were responsible. I still hadn't gotten used to this damned silence; I kept expecting to hear words emerging from the mouths of those around me, kept expecting to hear the shuffle of feet as they — as I — walked past the boutiques and bazaars along the waterfront. Even now, six months later.

I should never have agreed to the stand in Rome. I should have listened to my manager, to my friends; but it had been so long since I'd been on tour, so long since I'd released an album that *justified* a tour. . . . I'd never been a Top 40 singer — my voice was competent but unexceptional; my strength was in my writing. People bought my songs, not me, but for ten years it had been enough to sustain a modest career and a comfortable income. I cut three albums, had a single that hovered around No. 85 on the charts for a week or two back in '78, toured much of the States and most of Europe (where I'd always been more popular than in my own country) . . . until it all went away.

Not all at once, of course. You don't wake up one day and discover you can't write anymore; there are a lot of dead ends and aborted attempts along the way, dreadful songs that your label won't release, half-started

efforts not worth the time. It took me maybe two years to realize that I'd run dry. I still toured, but, without new material, I simply recycled past successes, and slowly but surely the audiences dwindled, and the bookings grew fewer and farther between. At the end of those two years, I gave up; better, I thought, to be remembered as a flash in the pan than to be propped up every few years as a nostalgia item. I had enough money to live comfortably: I finally had reason to thank the naive young twit who'd bought outright his house in Sonoma upon the sale of his first major album, because, with no mortgage payments to worry about, I had sufficient savings to live modestly, for some years. Even my ex-wife had remarried: good-bye alimony. And so I retreated, secluding myself, losing myself, in dope, and women, and — when I'd tired of both — fitful attempts at writing a novel. For, oh, the next eight years.

Then, suddenly — just a little over a year ago — it came back. I'd put aside the novel, nagged by a fragment of melody that refused to leave my head; in an attempt at exorcism, I scribbled down a few bars . . . and in three hours had a completed lead sheet — chorus, bridge, and coda. Along the way I took some of the words I'd been fruitlessly trying to stitch together into a book, and suddenly inside of a day had both lyric and music. Six weeks later, in a recording studio in Marin County, I was cutting a single for the first time in ten years.

Others followed; the dam had broken. I tried out a few on local engagements, and the reaction was enthusiastic enough to kick me into overdrive. Soon I had an album, and my label was talking a tour of Europe, my old reliable audience: Amsterdam, Salzburg, Munich, Brussels . . . and Rome. Goddamn it.

The *meltēmi* was blowing hot and dry, as it always did in August, but, far from sweating and complaining about it, as most tourists did, I welcomed it; in the absence of sound, I'd learned to appreciate other sensations. I loved the hot brush of the wind on my face as I window-shopped along the harborfront; I savored the warm afterglow of the ouzo; I lit a cigarette and took in a deep pull of smoke, exhaling it slowly. I smelled the fresh salt air; I watched the sun set behind a slowly turning windmill; I fed the pelicans at water's edge and smiled at their boldness in coming up to take the bits of bread I offered them.

I bought a watercolor in an art shop and had it mailed back to my niece in San Francisco, then, as night fell over Mykonos town, turning the

violet sky as black as the waters slapping against the fishing boats, I decided I was ready for dinner. I found another taverna, near the town square, across from a piano club; this time, thankfully, the waiter spoke English, and I was able to read his lips without difficulty.

— What can I get for you? he asked, smiling. — Some ouzo, perhaps?

I knew when I'd reached my limit. I ordered moussaka and a Greek salad sprinkled with black olives and feta cheese, relishing the meal as I did the wind, the sea air, the smell of food from adjacent restaurants. I concentrated on those sensations with such intensity that I almost forgot about the other, missing, sense. At least until halfway through my meal, when I saw musicians with instruments and amplifiers starting to warm up, and I felt a knot forming in my stomach, tension coiling in my chest. For an instant I wanted to bolt and run, but common sense prevailed: I hadn't even finished dinner. And besides, was this what I was going to do the rest of my life — run away every time I saw a goddamned woodwind? No. I had to start learning to live with it sometime; might as well be now. I looked down, took a forkful of moussaka, and tried to focus all my attention on the food, the wind, the briney air.

I didn't have to look up to know that the band had begun their first set; I felt it. I felt the big amplifier pounding out a heavy bass, resonating in the pit of my stomach; I felt the beat — a fast rock number — like a blind man reads braille. Except that braille is closer to the actual experience of reading — gives you the same information, more or less — than this. I felt the beat, but the melody was lost to me; I knew the meter, but not the measure. It was a tantalizing, frustrating kind of half-vision, and despite myself I started eating more quickly, hoping to finish before the band began its next number. There was a short pause after they finished — I applauded, politely, with the rest of the diners, then returned to my meal, only to look up when I felt the music begin again.

It was different this time; no hard percussion and aggressive stings of the synthesizer, but the distinctive 7/4 meter of traditional Greek music. I looked up and saw that only the keyboard man and guitarist were playing, and it wasn't an instrumental, but a vocal; a young woman stood before them, microphone in hand, singing to what seemed to be rapt attention all round.

She was extraordinarily beautiful: long, shining black hair, piercing olive-green eyes, rose-petal lips that opened and closed silently as she

sang. She sang mostly in Greek, only a few words here and there in English; I could make out only a few snatches of lyric. It didn't matter. For the first time since the accident, I found myself watching a singer without pain, frustration, anger, or envy; not just because she was beautiful, but because I *couldn't* hear her sing, and, stripped of voice and melody, I could see the way she sang. There was pain and sadness in her eyes, and in her face; her body swayed like a reed in a wind, and that was how I began to see her — fragile, vulnerable, sad. I felt an instant empathy for her, whether the result of her own expressiveness or my own melancholy, I don't know; but for the first time, it didn't bother me that I could no longer hear, because I *understood*, nonetheless.

She finished to what appeared to be tumultuous applause from the largely male audience; most looked like locals, not tourists, and by their manner seemed familiar with the taverna staff. They had obviously been here, and heard her, before. She accepted their applause with a small bow and a short nod, but there was something odd in both — I knew what it was like to hear applause, and even though I might never hear it again, I knew what should have been on her face, and it wasn't there. She seemed to take no pleasure in the approbation; her smile was pleasant, gracious, but somehow artificial. She quickly launched into a second song, more expansive, her head tilting back as she hit her high notes: This, like the first, was a traditional Greek bouzouki number — Greek love songs always seem to be mournful, or bittersweet, but it was more than just tradition I saw in her face; I saw again the pain, and — was it loneliness, or did I just *want* it to be loneliness? — in her eyes. Assuming it was there . . . assuming I wasn't just projecting my own isolation and hurt . . . what, I wondered, could such a young, beautiful woman have experienced to evoke such terrible sorrow?

I found her attractive, but by the end of the third song, the reaction of the audience — more animated and appreciative with each succeeding song — was beginning to depress me. What were they hearing that so transfixed them? What kind of voice elicited such enthusiasm? I didn't know. I could never know. And so, rather than torment myself, I paid my check and slipped quietly out of the café between songs.

Was it my imagination, or as she took her bows did the young woman cast an odd, puzzled look at me? I couldn't tell, and I didn't linger. I went back to window-shopping along the esplanade; it was a little after eleven,

and I didn't much feel like returning to my room at the Petassos Hotel.

Eventually, though, the memory of those olive-green eyes and shining black hair, that haunted face and pained smile, drew me back to the taverna, just as the band was packing up its equipment and the café was starten moved, allowing me to see that the nucleus around which they were all orbiting was, in fact, the singer I had seen earlier.

A more motley assortment of stage-door Johnnies would have been hard to find. Most seemed to be tourists — Americans, Frenchmen, Brits; one middle-aged man in a loud shirt and white slacks was getting his cocktail napkin autographed, gazing at the singer with schoolboy infatuation. His frumpy wife didn't look terribly pleased, and the moment the singer finished signing her name, the wife looped an arm through her husband's and practically dragged him away.

It was the same with the others — some wanted autographs; some were smiling and nodding and moving their lips in a manner I recognized from my own concerts, doubtless telling her how much they enjoyed her performance, et cetera, et cetera. And there were the younger men I'd tagged earlier as locals, for whom this was not the first visit. But what struck me most about these fans — returnees and first-timers alike — was the almost universal enchantment in their eyes; the kind of ardor one usually expects to find in fans of rock singers and movie stars. Clearly, they were all smitten by her, and she, for her part —

She accepted the attention graciously enough, but . . . maybe it's just because I've been on that side of the footlights myself, but I thought I could detect something just a bit forced about her smile . . . something infinitely weary in the way she took each napkin or brochure or slip of paper and signed it, smiling and nodding politely at the man who'd presented it. She was used to this, this kind of admiration; maybe it had been a long day, maybe she wasn't feeling well, but she was clearly weary of it all. My empathy as a fellow performer — or *ex-performer* — won out over my hormones; I turned and headed out the door, not wishing to add to her entourage, though not without noting her name on the small poster announcing that night's performance: *Leucosia. Leucosia Polodori.*

I started wending my way through the narrow, twisting streets of the

village — or Chora, as these tiny towns were called here — up the steep inclines, under balconies on which fresh laundry hung to dry, around people laughing and shouting, silently, at one another. I was diverted for a little while by a serious-looking chess game being played out in front of someone's whitewashed home: two old men solemnly contemplating the board, seeming almost to be living at a slower rate of time than the rest of us; there were neighbors gathered round, and every time one of the old men would make a move, the crowd would nod and talk among themselves, debating, perhaps, which man held the upper hand. Obviously a grudge match of some proportions, and one on which not a few bets were placed. Amused, I watched for five or ten minutes, until it became apparent that they — and I — might be here all night, and I moved along.

I was walking up a street with the impressive name of Ayion Tes-sarákonda, when I caught my first glimpse of them: two people standing in the middle of a narrow, intersecting street, arguing. You didn't need ears to recognize a Greek altercation: their bodies did most of the arguing. An intense young Greek man wearing a polo shirt and American jeans, and a beautiful young woman — with shining black hair and olive-green eyes — trying to fend off his unwelcome advances. . . .

At first I just stood there, not knowing if I were perhaps watching a lovers' spat, something I should steer well clear of; but the longer I watched, the more I detected genuine anger and resentment in her face, and, perhaps more important, that same starry-eyed adulation in his. She tried to walk away, but he grabbed her by the arm, half-threateningly, half-imploringly. She tried to wrest loose, to no effect, and I found myself hurrying toward them. They looked up at my approach, irritation flashing in the man's eyes at what I suppose he perceived as competition.

—Miss? I said. —Are you all right?

At least, that's what I heard myself say in my mind. I spoke in English, since she'd spoken it in the café; but before she could respond, the young man turned to her, a look of rage on his face, and shook her arm violently. He was speaking in Greek, so I could make out only a word here and there; in lipreading you catch only about a third of the words anyway, so most of the time you rely on "speechreading" — interpreting someone's meaning not just by the way they move their lips or tongue, but their body posture, hand motions, and general demeanor.

Frankly, I didn't give a shit *what* he was saying. The minute he shook

her with that savage jealousy, I stepped in, clamped a hand on his wrist, and pulled his hand away from her. She shrank back, rubbing the red marks left by his fingers.

— Do you know this man? I asked her.

She shook her head.

The young man broke my grip on his hand and regarded me with disgust. — Is this what you go for? he said to her, purposely, I suppose, in English. — *Turistês?*

She snapped something back, as did he, but most of it was lost on me; either their heads were turned away or they were talking too quickly. But then he lurched forward again, making another grab for her; and this time I didn't just clamp down on his wrist — I twisted. Hard. His mouth widened in a soundless cry, and before the pain could turn to anger, I stepped in front of him and gave him a hard, sudden push to the chest. He staggered backward, nearly slipping and falling on the cobblestones.

— Leave her be, I said, not knowing if I was raising my voice too loudly or not loudly enough.

He regained his balance, and for a moment I thought he might just sail into me; for a moment, to be honest, I hoped he would — he'd have made a convenient and justifiable object for the rage and bitterness within me. But maybe he was smarter than he looked; maybe he saw that pent-up anger inside, because he abruptly backed off, though not without a few parting epithets. He called me a son of a bitch, and the woman a whore. He retreated, muttering to himself, turning a corner and vanishing into the cloistered night.

I turned to face the woman, expecting — what did I expect? Gratitude? Attraction? An offer to buy me a drink? All three, probably. But what I got —

What I got was a weary, jaded look — the same world-worn expression I'd glimpsed in the café, but up close I could see how genuine and pained it truly was. There was a touch of grudging gratitude there as well, but for the most part she seemed to see in me just another variation of what I'd just driven away.

— Thank you, she said with a small nod and a tired smile. — I appreciate what you did. But please. . . .

I lost the rest of it because she'd already turned and was hurrying up the steeply inclined street. In moments she was gone, and I stood there

feeling confused and not a little stupid. Strange. A singer I'd never heard before, performing in some small taverna for doubtless smaller money . . . and yet she was so inundated by groupies that she was practically assaulted on the street. And expected — not unreasonably, I suppose — that even her rescuers had the same thing in mind. An odd woman, I thought, returning to the hotel; an odd evening, all round.

THREE DAYS later I was having breakfast in a small outdoor café, looking out at the fishing boats putting out to sea in the early-morning breeze. The *meltēmi* was still blowing hot and fierce, and I was growing tired of Mykonos, ready to move on to some other island. I didn't have to check back in with the Portmann Institute until mid-September for my follow-up exam, so I had four or five weeks to play with and any number of places I could wander. I could've gone back home, of course, but that was no more a consideration now than it had been when I'd checked out of the hospital in Paris. The thought of going back to Sonoma, surrounded by my instruments, my albums, my music, but not being able to hear any of it — of standing in a backyard stripped of the sound of crickets, birds, a deer standing in a clearing, bolting skittishly into the woods at my approach — all the large and small sounds I had come to know so intimately during my long seclusion. . . . It might have been home, but it would have been home with an entire layer of feeling, of memory, subtracted; I wasn't up to facing that yet. Better to stay in strange surroundings, the silence no stranger than the environs. Perhaps Delos next . . . or one of the distant islands. Youra with its goats and its fir trees, far from tourists and souvenir shops. Perhaps —

A shadow fell over me, blocking the bright Aegean sun, and I looked up to find the woman I'd "rescued" a few nights before, standing in front of me, mouth open in mid-sentence. She looked puzzled, as people often do when I don't respond to their calls from behind or out of my line of sight; I stood and smiled apologetically.

— Sorry, I said. — I'm afraid I have to see you before I can . . . "hear" . . . you. Could you repeat that, please? Slowly?

She started, taken totally off-guard. For a moment she didn't say anything; then:

— I was asking if I could . . . join you for a moment?

— Of course, I said, gesturing to her to sit. — Would you like some coffee?

She shook her head. She was staring at me with more than the usual amount of disbelief; as though she could not quite accept what I was implying.

— You have an . . . exotic . . . accent, she said slowly. — New Zealand?

I laughed, shook my head. — American. When you can't hear yourself speak, your pronunciation becomes a little . . . eccentric. I like "exotic" better, though. Makes me feel like a man of mystery. You think I should start wearing a black eye-patch?

She laughed, and I extended a hand. — John Ridley.

She took my hand, smiled. — Leucosia Polodori.

I held up both hands in mock surrender. — You're going to have to give me a phonetic on that one, I'm afraid. Just reading your lips, it's impossible to tell where the accents fall.

She took a pen from her purse and on a paper napkin wrote: *loo-koh-SEE-a*. God. It was bad enough trying to pronounce these names if you could hear, but when you *couldn't*. . . — Do you mind if I just call you 'Sia, for short? I asked sheepishly.

She stared, blinking, at me a long moment. She was wearing a white cotton dress, a sun hat, and a white enamel bracelet on one wrist. Why did she look so bewildered? Most people adjusted to my condition fairly quickly, but this — this was something almost approaching wonder.

— Yes, she said at length. — That would be fine.

She hesitated a moment before asking: — Have you been . . . deaf . . . since birth?

I shook my head. — An accident. About six months ago.

— I'm sorry.

— Not your fault. Blame the Red Guard.

Her eyes now showed more compassion than surprise, though that look of wonder still lingered. — A terrorist bomb?

I nodded.

— Not the hotel, in Rome?

I nodded again, not liking the direction the conversation was headed in, but knowing I'd pointed it there myself. — My tragic flaw, I said, trying to be flip. — I'm always late checking out. If I'd left five minutes sooner. . .

Shit. Enough of this. I signaled a waiter. — *Garsón! Kafē evropaikó, parakaló!*

I turned back to her. — Sure you don't want something?

She shook her head. — No. I just saw you sitting here, and I wanted to apologize if I seemed . . . brusque . . . the other night. I was grateful for what you did. The man you chased off . . . he's not dangerous, but he is persistent. He's followed me from Hydra to Santorin to here. I thought you . . . that is, I imagined. . . .

— I understand, I told her. — I used to be a performer myself.

She looked as though she immediately understood all that that implied. — A performer?

— A songwriter. A singer, like yourself.

— And you cannot hear at all now?

— It's not that bad, I lied. — I only wish I could have heard your performance last night.

— You . . . didn't actually hear me, then?

Either this woman was uncommonly thick or uncommonly strange. — 'Fraid not. I could make out some of the words, but not your voice.

My coffee with milk arrived; Leucosia changed her mind and ordered one as well. I lit a cigarette, mindful of the unusual way she seemed to be studying me; I'm not sure if I was flattered or embarrassed. She asked me about my career, and I told her about my albums, the one or two semihits, the places I'd toured. I asked her if she'd ever toured the States; she shook her head. — Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia. . . . I was in Japan a few years ago, then the Philippines. . . . I did stop over in Hawaii for a day or so, but that's as close as I've come. I've always wanted to visit New Orleans, though, to see — what is it called? — the Mississippi?

— You must be very popular.

She laughed uneasily. — Not really. I make a living, that's all. I'm fortunate that people are willing to pay me for doing what I have to do.

That struck me a little odd — what I "have" to do, not "like" or "love" to do? — but I dismissed it as we chatted on about favorite places in Europe, cities we'd both visited. — But you were born here? I asked. — In Greece?

Was it my imagination, or did she hesitate just a fraction of an instant? — Yes. In Athens.

She looked at her watch then, suddenly impatient. — I really must go. Again, I apologize if I offended you the other —

— Wait, I said, standing. — Would you . . . I mean, I don't want to sound like your roadie friend, but . . . would you be interested in having supper with me, tonight?

She stopped; looked at me with an expression part surprise, part confusion, part . . . pleasure?

— I . . . work very late. It would have to be a late supper.

— That's fine. I'll meet you at the taverna when you're done.

For the first time, she allowed herself a full, open smile. — That would be . . . very nice, she said, almost as though no one had ever asked her before. — I'll see you tonight.

I watched her perform again that evening; there were maybe half a dozen faces I recognized from the night before, but though by and large the audience was new — tourists fresh off the *Stella Solaris* for their six-hour stopover on the island — the reaction was very much the same as last night's. Wild enthusiasm, spontaneous applause, even, at the end, something of a standing ovation — with once more the men more avid in their attentions than the women. It was interesting the way women looked at Leucosia: many were puzzled at her popularity — envious, maybe a little threatened. But others seemed drawn to her as well: an elderly woman seemed rather motherly in the way she smiled at her; a young girl gazed up as though at an older sister; and at least one woman in her twenties looked as smitten with her as any of the men in the audience.

Halfway through her second set, Leucosia did something quite peculiar. By now I was watching her more than I was the audience, but I couldn't help but notice as everyone around and in front of me suddenly flinched at something I couldn't hear — hands went to ears; faces screwed up in annoyance. I looked around, puzzled, and when my gaze returned to Sia, I saw that she was staring at me as well — studying, scrutinizing me even as she continued to sing. When our eyes met, she looked away quickly; as quickly as her hand, the hand holding the microphone, pivoted.

I realized, with a start, that she had been pointing the mike directly at the monitor speakers — the small speakers turned away from the audience, toward the band — a sure way to create feedback. She'd done it on purpose, and I had the crazy suspicion she'd done it — God knew why — to test me. To see if I was indeed deaf.

Whatever her reasons, she seemed more relaxed now, and in those times when her eyes met mine while she was singing, there was a warmth and an openness I'd not seen before. Afterward we dodged her hordes of

admirers and sought out the sanctuary of the Lotus, an intimate little restaurant on the town's main street.

For a woman with so many admirers, she seemed uncommonly surprised when I made a first, tentative pass at her; surprised and pleased. We went for a walk along the harborfront, arms around one another's waist, lights glittering along the bay like stars tossed along the curve of a crescent moon. At the far end of the harbor, past the boats and the quays and the souvenir shops, I kissed her, tentatively; she returned it with an eagerness and a . . . I don't know how else to describe it . . . a *relief* I couldn't explain and didn't understand. Later, in my hotel room, we made love in much the same way: slowly, tenderly, with an edge of desperation and redemption to it. For my part, this was the first intimate contact I'd had with a woman since the accident, and I held her and kissed her and caressed her olive skin with the gratitude of a man who had felt utterly alone, until now. But I saw the same gratitude in her eyes; I felt the same relief in the way she exhaled a breath, long and slow, against me. We held one another as though onto lifelines of some sort, and though I knew why I was holding on so desperately, I couldn't begin to guess why she was.

Later I tried to find out, but she remained oblique, as ever, about her past.

— Were you ever married? I asked.

She hesitated. — A long time ago, she said, though she looked to be only twenty-nine or thirty at the most.

— You married young?

She laughed, as though at some secret joke. — When all the world was young.

She studied me then, a long moment, running her long fingers along the curve of my face; I did the same, smiling at her odd look. — You're so beautiful, I said in what I hoped was a whisper. — So lovely.

For a moment I thought that she was going to burst into tears; but instead she said, with a look of wonder on her face: — Really?

— I can't have been the first to say so.

She smiled sadly, kissed me lightly on the lips, and then the smile became a happy one — happy and warm and content.

— But you are, she said, and embraced me again. — You are.

We remained together for the rest of her engagement on Mykonos;

then, when she moved on, I moved with her. She had four- and five-night gigs at tavernas and nightclubs throughout the Aegean: Delos, Santorin, Corfu, Crete. . . . Sia showed me the islands by day, knowing each one of them, each ruin and excavation and museum and café as though she'd been there a hundred times before; and by night I watched her sing. She discouraged me from it — told me to go off by myself and we'd meet afterward — but I didn't. I wish now that I had — that I'd just taken things as they were and not begun to question — but —

It was always the same: every island, every club, every audience, the same cheers and approbation and stage-door Johnnies. It didn't matter if they were a French tour group or American; local Greek audiences or exotic-looking blacks from Mozambique. They loved her. They adored her. And more and more I wondered what they could possibly be hearing to evoke such spontaneous affection; how any singer, even the best of singers, could have universal appeal no matter where she went.

But even more puzzling than that: Why would a singer capable of evoking such a response remain largely unknown? Why wasn't she an international star? More than once I asked Sia about her management, offered to introduce her to heavyweights at ICM or CAA, but she always dismissed the idea with a laugh, as though it were preposterous. Yet somehow I knew that she was being merely disingenuous; behind that self-deprecating smile lay a mystery. It wasn't enough that I was in love, that that love helped blunt the pain I'd felt these past six months; I loved the woman, but had to solve the mystery of her.

My first small clue came in Athens, where she was playing — again — at a small club in the Plaka. I met her booking agent, a pleasant aging gentleman named Karlovassi; he told me, not without a sigh of frustration, that he'd been trying to get Sia to take bigger engagements for as long as he'd represented her — almost ten years — but she seemed to have no desire to be a Star, no urge to escape into any larger venues. She had a devoted following in many countries, and derived a comfortable income from her tours; she liked to travel, though much of it, oddly, was coastal travel — if not islands, then cities like Athens or Salerno, relatively close to the sea, or rivers. — I like the water, she told me later, unruffled. — I've always found it calming; peaceful.

Why didn't I believe her? — There's a whole world out there you haven't even touched! And you're still only — what — twenty-eight, twenty-nine. . . ?

— Ah, she said. — So that's it. A clever ploy to get me to reveal my age. Well, we'll have none of *that*.

And as she said it, she began nibbling at my neck. I began caressing her shoulders, and the subject was expertly turned aside, as usual. Our love-making had become more playful, more joyous, as though our love were taking a burden of sorrows off both of us; when she sang, I thought I detected a more upbeat demeanor in her face, no longer all sad bouzouki songs, but a few happy ones as well. As though it mattered. Happy or sad, her audiences remained vocal and loyal.

One morning, as Sia slept in after the previous night's performance, I slipped out, leaving a note saying I was going to the library to catch up on some American newspapers. I went to the library, true, but not for the papers. Damn mysteries, and damn the men who love to solve them. I accessed an entertainment database — in French, which I read passably well — and searched for any biographical material on a Leucosia Polodori; not too surprisingly, I suppose, nothing turned up. I narrowed the field to singers of Greek origin with last names of Polodori, wondering if she might have assumed a different forename for the stage, but the twenty-odd women whose names came up on the screen weren't Sia. Finally — out of frustration more than inspiration — I cross-indexed by first name. *Leucosia*. Singer. Greek origin. And, to my surprise, came up with:

Trahos, Leucosia. B. 1897, Katerini, Greece; d. 1941. Greek Soprano, debuting in 1922 with the Athens Opera, best known for her role as Mimi in La Bohème, which she performed in 1926 at Le Grand Théâtre, Bordeaux. She was soon singing such roles as Musetta, Hansel, and Sophie in Werther. Her astonishing range in roles also included Marguerite, Thäis, Salome in Hérodiade, Cio-Cio-San, and Louise. Toscanini heard her in Paris when she sang Antonia, Giuletta, and Olympia in Les Contes d'Hoffman, and he entreated her to perform at La Scala in Milan, and though she did sing at Il Teatro La Fenice, in Venice, she never did appear, oddly, in Italy's most renowned opera house. She sang at Das Nationaltheater, Munich; Die Staatsoper, Vienna; El Gran Teatro Liceo, Barcelona; El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires; L'Opera, Monte Carlo; as well as at the Salzburg and Florence festivals. She won great acclaim and popularity in the following decade, but her performances became increasingly rare as the 1930s came to a close, until her eventual disappearance and apparent death during

The closer I examined the locales of her performances; the more uneasy I became.

the Second World War; she was last seen in Hamburg, Germany, in 1941.

Interesting. At first glance, the antithesis of my Leucosia: this one sought, not shied from, the limelight. But the same popularity; the same ardent following. And the closer I examined the locales of her performances, the more uneasy I became: all either coastal cities, or, like Vienna and Munich, situated on a river — the Danube, the Würmsee. And Milan — Milan was some distance away from its nearest rivers, wasn't it? With a growing, yet nameless, sense of disquiet, I decided to look up a newspaper review of this Leucosia's 1922 Athens debut. In the microform library, I threaded a spool of film through a viewer, searching for the day and date of the debut; finally, after several minutes, I slowed the machine, stopped, backed it up . . . and found the review. In Greek, of course, so I could barely make out a single sentence, but I didn't need to; as soon as the page had settled into place on the screen, all need to translate the review vanished.

Above the review, dated November 12, 1922, was a photo that even given the poor reproduction of the time and the graininess of the micro-film, I immediately recognized as Leucosia. My Leucosia.

In Greece it is easy to believe in legends. You stand amid the ruins of the Minoan palace at Knossos, on a marble floor in what once, perhaps, was a bedchamber, or a servant's quarters, and you look out at a brown hillside dotted with contemporary farmhouses — not so modern that they seem unnatural beside the ancient ruins; in fact, just the opposite. Stands of trees border the palace, softening its jagged edges; a few steps down a road, horses graze in a farmer's pasture. The ruins, the farmhouses, the horses indifferent to the history beyond their fence, all of it seems connected; and seamless — you can imagine that these pale skies and rolling hills are the same skies and hills that residents of Knossos woke to, each morning, before the fiery Thera extinguished the city and its people.

You stand, as I stood, in an inner chamber supported by cobalt-blue pillars, gazing at a reddish brown mural depicting some strange hybrid beast — half-peacock, half-lion — and you wonder if such creatures once

stalked the hills just outside. You see a bas-relief of a raging bull, vivid and realistic, and you wonder: If the Minoans were capable of such literal and precise replication of life, might not that strange hybrid creature also be taken from life? Some rare species of animal wiped out, along with Knossos, in the volcanic eruption?

I made my way through dim, narrow passageways that frequently led to dead ends, finally ascending up crumbling steps to daylight; the brightness of the Aegean sun made me blink, made me shut my eyes for a few seconds, and when I opened them and turned around —

Sia stood in front of me, as vivid and frightening as the beast in the mural. I jumped reflexively, and her smile dimmed quickly.

— John? she said. — Are you all right?

I laughed, but still it took me a moment to loop my arm through hers. — Fine. You just startled me.

She looked dubious. — Are you sure? Perhaps all this sight-seeing is catching up with you.

Perhaps; but not in the way she meant.

— Maybe so, I lied. — Let's get back to town.

That night, back in Iráklion, I sat as Sia captivated, as usual, the diners in the Ta Psaria restaurant; I was drinking perhaps too much of the potent local ouzo, called *tsikoudiá*, but even that wasn't enough to blunt the new edge of fear I felt when gazing at my lover. Back in Athens I'd looked up the mythological origins of her name, and though I failed to find any other renowned Greek singers named Leucosia — it was a mark of my obsession that I actually searched the microfiche and other files for as far back as two hundred years — I did find several disturbing parallels in other singers . . . other women, scattered in time from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, with careers similar to the one I'd discovered in the 1920s: a rapid rise to fame, a public fervor and adulation remarkable in its intensity, engagements in coastal or river cities, then sudden death or disappearance. Their names weren't Leucosia, but for all purposes they might as well have been.

With the help of a young reference librarian, I had all the newspaper articles I could find on Leucosia Trahos translated into English. Most noteworthy was a brief mention of the fact that Miss Trahos, like other opera singers before and after her, disdained and forbade any recording of her voice — claiming that the recording could not capture the

full scope of her high soprano tones.

I remembered Sia's manager, Karlovassi, telling me how Sia had steadfastly refused to cut an album, even a single; how she went to great pains to arrange, with the management of the clubs she performed in, that no tourists be allowed in with tape recorders.

It was then, I think, that I truly became afraid, for the first time.

From Crete we took a late-night cruise ship to Rhodes, where we would arrive the next day; we walked alone on the upper deck of the ship, the *meltēmi* barely cooled from the day, a bright canopy of stars above us. Out here, so far from the lights of any city, I saw more stars than I'd ever known existed; I saw the Milky Way in its full glory for the first time. It was easy to see the gods in the constellations above me; easy to believe what I now believed. We walked silently for some minutes, and then, emboldened, no doubt, by the effects of the *tsikoudiā*:

— When did you decide to go back to using your real name? I asked, as casually as I could manage. — Did you suppose that by 1922 people would have forgotten?

She stopped dead and looked at me — first with surprise, then shock, then an anguish that made me regret ever having said the words; that made me wish I could take them back, put things back as they had been before. As though anything could do that now.

She turned away, careful to keep in profile so that I could read her lips all the better, though at first I wondered if she would say anything at all — make any kind of acknowledgment of what I'd implied. After almost a full minute, she looked down and said simply, — I missed it. It was the name I was born with, and after so long, I missed it.

She hooked up at me sharply. — Obviously a stupid, sentimental error on my part.

There was anger in her eyes, anger at herself, anger at me for having found out. The breeze blew her hair around her neck, and a spray of salt was carried on the night wind. — How long? I asked, terrified that she would tell me.

She looked at me, and I saw that there was fear in her eyes as well. — Are you frightened? she said. — Is that why you've been acting so strangely this past week?

I hesitated. — Yes, I admitted. — I guess I am. But. . .

I put my hand to her cheek, gently, a gesture that seemed to surprise

her. — The more I know, the less frightened I'll be.

She considered that a long moment; turned away, staring into the darkness of the Aegean at night, toward unseen islands black against black; and slowly, she nodded.

— All right, she said. — I'll try.

She took a deep breath and began:

— I lied when I said I was born in Athens. . . . I don't know where I was born, really; but I was raised, along with my sisters, Parthenope and Ligea, in the town of Halos, on what became known as the Halian coast. We were brought up by a middle-aged spinster who doted on us as though she were our own mother; who told us, when we were old enough, that we had been placed in her care shortly after our births.

— She told her neighbors that a messenger from the gods had delivered us to her; that we were the offspring of two Muses and a god — the river god, Achelous, having taken both Melpomene and Terpsichore as lovers, and from that union of nature and inspiration came three daughters, three golden children with great beauty and voices to match. She told them that they had been placed in her care because of their lineage from Achelous; that though our souls belonged on Olympus with our mothers', our bodies were, like our father's spirit, bound to the earth — to its rivers and oceans and seas. We would never be able to wander far from the water, but, by the same token, the divine beauty of our song could grace the earth.

— The townspeople thought her mad, of course, but as we grew older, their doubts paled. Because almost from the day we were able to utter sound, we sang: nonsense songs at first, the high, fluting singsong of babes; but as we learned to talk, we added words, and learned to memorize rhymes with astonishing speed. The townspeople, enchanted by the beauty of our voices, began to accept that we were who our guardian said we were. We could have been . . . we should have been . . . a source of light and joy, as our celestial parents intended. Terpsichore was the Muse of song and dance, and it was from her we inherited our voices; but Melpomene, in addition to being the Muse of lyric poetry, was the Muse of tragedy as well . . . something we came to realize only too late.

— Our voices began as the beguiling laugh of children whom adults fawn over, then, as we matured, turned into seductive giggles of adolescents who could have their pick of any of the boys in the village. I liked it.

I was very different then from what I am today; you would not have liked me much, I'm afraid. I was vain and fickle and quite taken with myself; I enjoyed the attention, and began to think of it as my due. If a boy showed less than total interest in me, I was affronted, and went after him with all my wiles and skill until he was utterly smitten with me. Then, once I'd conquered him, once I'd grown bored with him, I cast him aside. He kept on loving me, but I ignored him, wouldn't even speak to him; I'd moved on to other quarry by then. My sisters and I even developed a competition to see which of us could lure a particular boy away from one of the others . . . a game, a sibling rivalry.

— Other girls worked to achieve *charis*, or grace; we were above such things. And the older we grew, the more powerful our voices became; it was an involuntary effect, though none of us, at the time, complained about it. We didn't have to sing, you see, to enthrall our listeners . . . just the sound of our voices was enough to charm any man, and, if she were to listen long enough, any woman . . . but we discovered as we entered adolescence that we *had* to sing — we were *compelled* to sing — each day. Sometimes in choirs or recitals, sometimes just sitting on the porch of our home, Ligea playing the lyre, Parthenope and I joining in in song. Each time we would be besieged by young boys and older men, some of the latter wealthy merchants enticing us to marriage with promises of security and luxury. Parthenope took one such man as a husband, only to have him killed by another, jealous suitor, less than a year after their wedding. She remarried just days later, shocking the entire village; though not half as much as Ligea. Ligea cared not for wealth, and after she'd sated herself with all the men she desired, grew bored with such easy conquests and set her sights on women. Women, as I say, were more difficult to entice — but not, as Ligea proved, impossible. She seduced a poor young peasant girl and had the little waif following her around constantly; when she tired of her, she cast her aside as I'd cast my share of boys aside, and the young girl, disowned by her family and ostracized by the village, left Halos in shame. In many places back then, young boys were routinely "initiated" into manhood by older men called *erastai*, but outside the few female communities, or *thiasoi*, like Sappho's, love between women was by no means as tolerated as that between men.

— As for me, I was as entranced with my own power as were my victims; I delighted in the lure, the hunt, the capture, and became quickly

bored once I'd won the heart of the hapless prey. A fistfight between would-be suitors excited me back then; I even encouraged them. After all, I told myself, I was the daughter of a Muse and a god; was I not a prize worth fighting for? Ultimately, would not some proud Jason claim me as his due treasure?

— But it never came to that. Our vanity undid us even before we reached our twenties. Parthenope, now married to a third wealthy husband, had so enraptured a visiting merchant that he demanded she run away with him, to Athens, promising gold and glory. When she demurred — not out of morality, but simply because she didn't believe him half as wealthy as he claimed — he killed himself, leaving behind a note pledging his eternal devotion, promising to wait for her in Elysium.

— Ligea, meanwhile, had seduced the wife of a village magistrate — a patrician woman some ten years older than she. This proper, elegant woman fell so wildly in love with Ligea that she attempted to kill her own husband, to be free to be with Ligea; Ligea, flattered that her charms had turned this courtly, gentle lady into a cunning, far from horrified, would-be murderess, was unrepentant even when captured.

— It was then I began to realize what our mixed heritage had done to us, but by then, it was far too late to do anything about it.

— Divine or not, we were clearly a threat to Halos. In the end it was the women — the wives — of the town who came for us, dragging us from our homes, gagging first Ligea, then all three of us, before we had the opportunity to entrance them. They bound our hands behind our backs and paid a fisherman to take us to an uninhabited but fertile island, Anthemoessa, many miles offshore. We were marooned there with enough provisions to live for a year, and seeds to sow a crop for the following season. There was a freshwater spring on the island, and an abandoned house belonging to a long-dead goat-herder, that became our new home. The waters were too deep, the land too distant, for us to swim ashore, and none of us had the slightest idea of how to go about building a boat — everything had always come so easily to us, and now that was to be our undoing.

— We sang each day as we always did, and in the first month we realized that the louder we sang, the farther the north wind carried it across the sea; one day a fishing boat veered toward our island, and we rejoiced at the thought of rescue . . . until it wrecked itself on the jagged rocks of the shoals surrounding us. I watched men drown in the foaming

surf, and I felt sick. Yet we were compelled by our lineage to sing, and so we did, standing for hours at the edge of a high, steep cliff, our song carried on the dry *meltēmi*. Men aboard ships heard the song and changed course to follow it; all of them — so horribly many of them — perished on the same rocks that had claimed the first boat. I grew sick with each wreck, horrified as the ships splintered on the shoals, spilling their fragile cargo of men into the sea.

— But Parthenope and Ligea . . . perhaps it was the passing of years, the isolation, the hopelessness . . . or perhaps it was simply the way they were, the way they would have been in any case. Parthenope and Ligea went a little mad, and came to relish each shipwreck — competing with each other to lure boats to their dooms, laughing with delight as the sailors were slammed by the surf onto the reef. Bitter and angry and increasingly insane, they gazed with unfocused eyes and crazed smiles at the bleached skeletons of sailors strung like necklaces of bone on the rocks below.

— Years passed, but we grew no older. Once, a sailor survived the wreck of his ship; I nursed him back to health, and he, of course, fell in love with me. It was the first time, I think, that I valued a man's love, appreciated it as something more than balm to my own vanity; I loved him as well, and for a short while . . . a handful of months . . . we were happy. Until. . .

— Until Parthenope and Ligea, out of jealousy and spite, trained their voices on him . . . sang to him, in a vicious duet that I could hardly compete with. Slowly his affections changed . . . he came to worship my sisters, and they turned him against me, forcing him to shun me if he wanted their affections. They took him to bed together, and I could hear the guttural laughter from the next room, could imagine the perversions they were performing on him. He scorned me to the end; and I finally discovered what it felt like to be on the other side of things . . . finally realized how hollow and unreal the "love" I instilled in men truly was. I couldn't bear being near him, seeing what their songs had turned him into; I preferred to die. And so, one gray and cloudy morning, I dove off the highest cliff on the island, into the rocky shoals below.

— I hurt, but I did not die. My arms, my legs, virtually every bone in my body was broken . . . but they healed. I *couldn't* die. Heaven knows I tried, then and later, but I was paying the price for my misuse of the gods' gifts; this was our damnation, to walk the earth and sing and never know true love. Even Parthenope and Ligea would come to realize that, someday.

— As the decades passed, fewer and fewer ships strayed anywhere near our island. But once the sailor was in their thrall, Parthenope and Ligea had him build a boat for us, from the wood of a myrtle tree; and nearly a century after our initial imprisonment, we escaped the rocky shores of Anthemoessa. We went our separate ways, meeting only once again, hundreds of years later. I'd been performing as a singer all those years — even allowed myself the indulgence of a few soaring, triumphant careers, always cut short before my eternal youth became evident — and it was perhaps fifty years ago that I saw Parthenope again. It was as though she were a different woman. Watching centuries of human misery and war go by had made her, finally, aware of her own cruelty and shame, and the blood on her hands. When I saw her, she was living in self-imposed exile on an island off the Cypriot coast, tormented by her guilt and loneliness. Ligea, when I'd seen her a decade before, was in Paris; she'd gone mad in a different way. The guilt had finally gotten to her as well, but her solution was not exile but a different kind of withdrawal. Every day for a month, she had stood in her tiny room near the Seine, stared into a mirror . . . and sung to herself. Like Narcissus, she fell in love with her own reflection, and now her penance for her many sins was to love an image in a glass . . . to pine away, as Narcissus had, for the one thing she could never have.

— And I, she said, — I paid penance as well. I took lovers . . . many lovers . . . over the years; I couldn't live without affection, even unearned affection. Because that was my particular damnation: I knew no man would ever truly love me, for the mere sound of my voice, let alone my song, made all love false and hollow. And then. . . .

She hesitated. — And then you. And for the first time, someone loved me for myself . . . someone who couldn't even hear my voice. And now, I see, my penance is not complete. Now I have to live with the knowledge of having truly been loved . . . and having lost it.

She turned away from me, abruptly, fatalistically, and hurried into the night breeze; I followed her, called out her name, finally caught up with her on the foredeck and grabbed her by the arm, forcing her to turn round and face me, so I could read her lips. I was trembling, no longer with fear, but with anger, anger for what she had endured, for the purgatory to which she had been so randomly — or at least unjustly — condemned.

— No, I said, hoping my voice was soft. — You haven't lost anything.

Her eyes widened in astonishment; I took her by the shoulders, drew her to me, and, as tenderly as I could manage, kissed her. She wrapped her arms around me as though grasping at life itself; I returned the embrace, kissed her again, and as I stood there, stroking her, reassuring her, I felt something wet on my neck. I had not heard her weeping, but I'd felt her tears. I wiped them off her cheeks, took her to bed, and in the silence hoped to show her how much she was loved.

THAT SUMMER we came to cherish our relationship as never before. Knowing the truth about Sia freed me; I felt as though I'd been entrusted with a rare, fragile gift. Being able to offset, in some measure, all those years of her pain and loneliness made me almost giddy with pleasure; more and more I saw happiness in her eyes when she sang, the melancholy now an undertone in a richer, more resonant song. I was pleased to be the catalyst for the sea change in her mood and in her smile. We — she — continued to tour the Mediterranean, from Majorca to Cyprus, Sia acting as my tour guide in each new city or country, for she'd visited each so many times in her long lifetime; I asked her if she wasn't bored by the sight-seeing, but she looked genuinely surprised and laughed an easy, don't be silly kind of laugh. — Of course not, she said, smiling. — It's different when you have someone to share it with.

— But you have. You said yourself you had other lovers.

— I had . . . liaisons, she said carefully. — It isn't love when they have no choice but to love you. And even then I couldn't share all this as I do with you . . . couldn't tell them that I stood over there, on that road, five hundred years before, when it was just a dirt path; that I saw Rome rise and fall, watched kings ascend thrones and revolutions topple them. There's so much I've never been able to tell anyone . . . not even my sisters.

I took her in my arms, kissed her gently. — I'm honored, I said.

— Honored? she said playfully. — Or just horny?

I laughed. — Maybe a little bit of both.

We kissed again, then continued walking along the windblown path. We'd driven up from Bari, an Italian port on the Adriatic Sea, and she told me how she had stood on this very spot, unimaginable years before — on the banks of the River Aufidus, watching Hannibal's armies in their march to Cannae, two hundred years before the birth of Christ. It was like that everywhere we went — Palermo, Valencia, Dubrovnik — as her past,

so long concealed behind false identities and forged birth certificates, was opened up to me . . . to me and, I believe, to her as well. In a way I think she was reclaiming her past, coming to terms with it as she revealed it to me, place by place, memory by memory, over the next two months.

The change in her was slow but profound; she laughed more and more, her smiles no longer forced but gracious, and open. It was like watching a garden bloom after a long winter.

And yet, every once in a while, there was still a stab of doubt, and worry. Like the night we lay in bed in a hotel room in Marseilles, having made love, she nestled in my arms, I tracing a line around her jaw as she listened to the call of a foghorn somewhere outside. . . . when suddenly, without moving, without showing any physical trace of tension or fear, she said:

— It'll be all right, you know, when the time comes. When you have to leave.

I started. — *What?* I said.

She shifted position. — If a time comes when you decide you have to go, I'll understand. Really.

— What the hell brought this on? I asked, baffled. — What makes you think I want to go anywhere?

— Not now, she said, and that shadow of melancholy appeared again in her eyes, — but twenty . . . thirty . . . forty years from now . . . you may feel different. As you grow old, and I remain . . . the same.

I considered a moment before replying. — Has that happened before to you?

— No . . . no, I was always careful to break it off in time . . . ten years, fifteen . . . but. . . .

— If anyone's likely to get cold feet, it won't be me, I said, trying to sound offhanded about it. — Are you sure *you'll* want to stick with the doddering old fart *I'll* be in thirty years?

She looked suddenly panicky. — Don't say that! she said, so quickly I almost couldn't make out the words. — I *love* you; I'll love you when you're forty or fifty or seventy. If anyone is used to seeing the ravages of time, it's me.

— Then what *are* you afraid of? I asked gently. — A *real* relationship . . . a lifetime relationship? Does that frighten you?

She hesitated. — No, she said, very seriously at first; then she looked

up, and I saw the beginnings of a smile on her lips, turning into a broad grin. — It terrifies me! she said, collapsing into laughter.

I joined in the laughter, even though I couldn't hear it, and drew her closer to me.

— It terrifies everyone, I said as I stroked her back gently. — Welcome to the worries of the everyday world.

She was half-turned away from me, smiling as she gazed out the window at the foggy night, but I think I read two words on her lips. "Yes," was one, "Welcome. . . ."

In September I returned to the Portmann Institute outside Paris, as scheduled, for my four-month exam. It had been here, in these pleasant but impersonal rooms some six months before, that I had learned how to lip-read, and, even more important, how to speak. When you can't hear your own voice, even conducted through the bones in your head, you speak too loudly, you begin to enunciate oddly; audiogenic dyslalia, it's called. In many ways the lipreading was the easiest part to learn: I walked past rooms in which I'd spent hours watching videotapes — some instructional, some plain old movies and TV shows — learning to interpret speech through careful study of a person's face, or body language. Learning to glean as much from the visual as I could, to compensate for the dialogue I couldn't hear. In movies you start to study the way an actor stands, or walks, or what bits of business he does with his hands; at first I was allowed the luxury of remote playback, slow motion, and stop-frame, but after I'd been taught the fundamentals, they took my remote away from me, on the reasonable assumption that in real life you can't back up the action for a second look.

My auditory trainer, Renata, greeted me with a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek. She was a skilled, compassionate woman in her late forties, blonde hair going gray, with bright blue eyes. — John, she said, smiling. — How have you been getting on, these past months?

— Fine, I said. — Traveling quite a bit. The Mediterranean, mostly.

Her nose wrinkled a bit as I spoke; when I'd finished, she frowned thoughtfully. — Your vowels are becoming rather . . . baroque, shall we say? And when you said "mostly," there was the hint of an *h* after the *s*. I think you need a little brushup.

— That's what I'm here for, I said. And for the next several days, while

the doctors took follow-up X rays and examinations, I went back into speech-correction therapy with Renata, back to the visible speech devices and the videotapes: they used video to tape me pronouncing certain vowels and consonants, then showed me, side by side, someone pronouncing the same syllables the correct way. It was irritating to think I could so easily forget the basics of something I'd taken for granted most of my life, but I put aside my embarrassment and tried to emulate the people on screen. By the end of that week, I was up to speed again, and ready — impatient — to leave and return to Sia; but on the last day, Dr. Peyrot and Dr. Bousquet sat me down for an unexpected chat, and I wasn't sure what to make of the guarded, sober expressions on their faces.

— Now, we don't want to get your hopes up, Dr. Peyrot began cautiously. — But the new X rays seem somewhat promising.

I started. This was the last thing I expected to hear; I'd assumed the exam was routine, that the primary purpose of this visit was for speech correction. The prospects for any improvement in my condition had been made very clear to me months before. — What the hell is that supposed to mean? I said sharply. — I thought you told me nerve deafness couldn't be corrected by anything.

— That's true, Dr. Bousquet admitted. — And you *are* totally nerve-deaf in your left ear, the one that was closer to the explosion. But we also told you, you suffered only a partial nerve loss in your right ear — perhaps 50 percent — and the remaining hearing loss was the result of ossicular discontinuity.

— The small bones in my middle ear?

— The explosion separated several bones in the ossicular chain, Peyrot explained. — Most severely, the malleus and incus. Frankly, we'd feared further deterioration with time, but, happily, that's not the case . . . which makes tympanoplasty a viable option now.

I felt numb; stunned. — Surgery? I asked dully.

Dr. Peyrot nodded. — We can't promise a total hearing recovery in the right ear . . . not just because of the neural damage, but because the repair to the ossicles themselves will probably be only 70 to 80 percent effective. You should, however, end up with something approaching 50 percent of normal . . . enough to perceive the higher tones, such as the human voice.

They looked at me expectantly, clearly pleased, happy that they were able to break this news to me . . . waiting for me to say something. Except,

I didn't know what to say. The numbness was starting to wear off, as it finally began to sink in: I'd be able to *hear* again. Maybe not well, but enough to hear music, enough to hear my own voice again, *other* people's voices, *Sia's* voice —

And then I realized.

Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus, no. . . .

Peyrot and Bousquet were looking at me with concern. — John? Are you all right?

I fought back the cold fear in my chest, the chill starting in my heart and growing, metastasizing, throughout my body. I looked up. — You're sure? I said. — You're sure this will work?

— As I said, Peyrot assured me, — it looks promising. Almost certainly you'll regain enough of your hearing to resume songwriting, though performing might not be advisable . . . at least not around large amplifiers with high decibel counts. You play guitar, don't you?

I was barely paying attention to him. — Yes, I said distantly.

— You could probably perform in smaller situations . . . small clubs, with just your guitar as accompaniment, but larger concerts . . . well, I'm afraid not. Nothing to stop you from recording albums, however, if you — what do you call it? — "mix" in the accompaniment later.

How could they know that that was the farthest thing from my mind just now? I stood, and I must have looked very pale and shaky, because both men moved almost as though to catch me.

— I'll have to think about it, I found myself saying, and even though I couldn't hear it, I knew my tone was flat; dull.

The two doctors exchanged startled looks. — The procedure is quite safe. Bousquet assured me. — The prognosis is excellent. You needn't —

— I have to think about it! I repeated, louder, I hoped, even as part of me knew that if I said yes, I wouldn't have to worry about such things anymore. Oh Christ. Why the hell did I come here? Why the hell had they done this to me?

I started for the door; Peyrot and Bousquet hurried after me. — John! Please. Where can we reach you?

— You can't, I said, opening the door. — *I'll reach you.*

— But the procedure is. . . .

I was gone before I caught the rest; out the building, before I could turn back. I caught the next flight back to Athens, a late flight; I dozed during

the trip, and dreamed that I could hear again. When Sia greeted me at the airport, she saw immediately the stress on my face; I chalked it up to the travel and told her I'd be fine after a good night's sleep. Except, I barely slept all night, and in those moments when I did, I dreamed I heard Sia's voice, high and fluting, raised in song, and I woke, frightened and afraid.

If Sia had any inkling of what I was going through, she never let on; and in fact, I don't think she did. We spent the next two weeks completing her Mediterranean tour, and through it all I became increasingly tense and irritable. For the first time, I began to feel uncomfortable — began to feel like a groupie, an appendage, remembering the days when I was the focus of attention, when it was I who sang for the crowd, I whom the audience came up to afterward and asked for autographs. When Sia asked me what was wrong, however, I merely attributed the irritation to the traveling — we had, after all, been on tour for the better part of three months, and it was beginning to wear on me, though not in the ways I let on. We decided to go back to Mykonos, where Sia could perform at her old clubs for a few months, and where we could enjoy more stability and relaxation than we could on the road.

We rented a small villa near the Paraportian Church, settling into a more domestic relationship. And despite my conflicting emotions, the one thing that did not change was the depth of my love for Sia. Perhaps it was because now I, too, had a glimpse of a life that *could* be, and I could appreciate all the more Sia's centuries of longing and loneliness, and then, sudden fulfillment; but she became dearer to me with every day, apace with the frustration inside me at not being able to hear, knowing that I could change that, knowing, too, that I could *not*.

Well, well, I told myself; Beethoven composed his Ninth Symphony while he was totally deaf — if I was truly the artist I fancied myself, I should be able to compose, if not to perform, new material. Unlike many pop musicians these days, I can actually read music — I was never at the mercy of computers and sequencers to create my songs — and so I set about writing some, as I always had, in longhand on sheets of music paper. I could still remember the sound of a dominant seventh chord or a suspended fourth, and with those in mind, I spent the better part of a week composing a song that had begun forming in my mind from the moment I'd been told I might be able to hear again. It was a bittersweet melody,

and while I was writing it, my mood improved greatly; Sia was happy to see me at work again, and I could even go to her performances without feeling useless, or frustrated.

But once the music had been written, there was no way for me to play it and see if it worked. I'd wired my business manager back in L.A. to send me money for a synthesizer — God knows what he must have made of that request — and though I tried playing it for Sia, I couldn't finish: I had to *hear* the music, had to know whether it was working, where to polish, what to omit. Desperate now, I remembered the vibrations I'd felt from the amplifiers in that taverna months before, and embarked on a long, arduous process of compensation: I placed the amp close by as I slowly and laboriously depressed each key on the keyboard, trying to memorize the particular vibration I felt with the note I knew I was playing. It was slow, frustrating, and virtually impossible to discern the minute differences in pitch between, say, bass notes; and I couldn't even be sure if the timbres I "felt" were the differences between actual tone-colors or simply indicative of the particular "voice" I'd chosen for the synthesizer. Finally, after another month, I gave it up in an angry shove to the synthesizer, the keyboard flew off the stand, soundlessly crashing into the amplifier, falling facedown onto the stone floor.

It was impossible. Perhaps Beethoven was able to compose things of beauty without being able to perceive them as anything but notations on a sheet; but I wasn't Beethoven, by a long shot. I needed to hear the work, whether out of genuine artistic technique, or simple unadorned ego: the thought of creating something beautiful, something that could touch people's hearts, and not being able to appreciate it myself, was something I could scarcely imagine.

So I quit. Sold the synthesizer, got rid of the computer (I already knew I wasn't a novelist; little point in going over that tired terrain again), and asked myself which was more important: my art, or my love for Sia?

It was too close to call. In the end, what swayed me was what I have already said: trapped in this private hell, I could, ironically, appreciate all the more the purgatory to which Sia had been condemned. If she could stand it for as long as she had, I could stand it for the few decades remaining to me.

And that would have been the end of it, but for the vagaries of fate. Or, as I'm sure Sia would maintain, the legacy of Melpomene.

The only person who knew where I was living was, of necessity, my business manager; he continued to collect the royalties on my various recordings, deposit them in the appropriate accounts, make payments on my credit cards, and every four months send me a quarterly statement of my finances, which were healthy. I had told him not to forward any but the most urgent-looking mail, and I do not blame him for sending the envelope return-addressed *Portmann Institute, Paris, France*, and marked, in French — the words underscored in red — *Please Forward!*

It was from Dr. Bousquet, asking me, imploring me, whether I had reconsidered, and would I please call him as soon as possible to arrange for tympanoplasty? I shredded the envelope, tossed it in a wastebasket, and burned the letter. I cabled my business manager and told him *under no circumstances* was he to forward any more letters from the Portmann Institute. Perhaps I should have worded the message a bit less vehemently, because it could have been interpreted as indicative of an imbalance of some kind; as indeed it was. I discovered the details only later, but apparently Dr. Bousquet, after his first letter went unanswered and his second was returned to him unopened, called my manager and explained the situation. My manager, who doubtless-already thought I didn't have both oars in the water, judging by my refusal to return home to Sonoma, allowed himself to be persuaded by Dr. Bousquet that I was still suffering from depression, that I was irrationally rejecting the only opportunity I would ever have to restore my hearing, and my career.

My manager relented and gave him my address on Mykonos.

Dr. Bousquet sent a cable to me at that address.

I wasn't in when it arrived; but Sia was.

The telegram wasn't overly specific, but its allusions were enough to send Sia to the nearest phone — we had none in the villa — where she called Dr. Bousquet. By the time I returned from my trip into town to get groceries, Sia knew the whole story. And she was furious.

— Why didn't you *tell* me? she demanded.

I was taken off-guard, but managed to keep something of my wits about me before replying. — It was my decision to make, I told her.

— I have no say in the matter?

— It's my life.

— Our life. A decision like this affects *both* our lives.

— If I made any decision *other* than this, I insisted, — “our” life

wouldn't even exist! All I'd have to do is hear your voice, and the love that we have would be rendered as false, as meaningless, as any of the empty relationships you've talked about in the past.

She barely acknowledged this, quickly shifting the subject. — Dr. Bousquet says that you might regain enough of your hearing to compose again . . . possibly even *perform* again. I've seen you, John, these past weeks, trying to compose without hearing, trying to create without seeing what it is you're creating! It's tearing you apart.

— Was tearing me apart, I maintained. — I realized it couldn't be done, so I've stopped trying.

She paled at that, her face a tense mask as she spoke. — It couldn't have been as casual a decision as that, she said stubbornly. — Can you stand there and tell me, honestly, that not being able to compose . . . to perform . . . doesn't matter to you?

I considered only a moment before answering.

— No, I said, truthfully. — It does matter. It's just that . . . you matter more.

I tried to explain what I was feeling . . . the sense that my own frustration seemed insignificant compared to her sacrifices . . . but far from placating her, she became angry and defensive.

— I don't want you staying with me out of pity, damn it! she snapped.

— It's not pity, I said quickly. — It's. . .

I hesitated. How did I articulate what I was feeling? Was it just pity? No; it was more than that. But —

She snapped up her purse, slung it over her shoulder, and started for the door. — I have to go, she said, chilling me until she completed the sentence: — I have my first set at six. I have to go set up.

— I'll come with you.

She turned, stopped, and the anger in her face had turned to confusion. — No, she said. — Please. I need to think. I can think when I'm singing.

Seeing the fear in my eyes, she added, — I'll be back. I promise. All right?

I nodded wordlessly. She turned and left. Damn, I thought. You can't win. Even when you make the right decision, you get screwed. I stayed in the villa for the next five hours, trying futilely to get through one-third of one-fourth of the *Alexandria Quartet*, terrified that the clock would pass eleven, twelve, one o'clock, with no trace of Sia; but a little past 11:30,

the door opened and she entered, a small smile on her lips as she saw me look up from the book. I got up, embraced her, kissed her long and tenderly. Without preamble, we went into the bedroom, slowly took off one another's clothes, kissed each other's hands, arms, legs, caressed one another's back, then slowly and tenderly made love. No words were spoken; it was as though we were gauging the extent of each other's love through touch and kiss alone, dispensing with the words and sounds that had created this barrier, this encumbrance between us. We made love again and again, until finally, sometime in the middle of the night, as the *meltēmi* drew a long sigh through the hot, soundless room, she turned on her side and faced me, touching my cheek with the back of her hand.

— It's difficult for me, she said, with no trace of anger or defensiveness now. — I'm the daughter of a Muse, and when I look at you, I see a man deaf to his muses, a man in pain. And I don't want to be responsible for that.

I cupped my hand to the back of her neck, stroked her long black hair slowly. — And I don't want to be responsible, I said — for taking away the first real happiness you've known. I can't hurt you that way.

— You'd rather hurt yourself? she asked.

— Yes.

— As would I, she replied.

I had to smile. — Have you ever read O. Henry? I asked.

— No, she said. — Why?

— Nothing. Doesn't matter.

I held her close to me, as though trying to bind our bodies together. — I love you, Sia.

She pulled back so that I could read the words, and the sad smile, on her lips. — And I love you.

We fell asleep holding one another; I drifted off aware of the warmth of her body, the beating of her heart. But when I woke the next morning, there was no one in bed beside me, and what few belongings she had were gone from the closets. She left a note, thanking me, telling me she loved me, and wishing me long life. Health, and long life. Not without a certain rueful irony.

I searched for her for the next six months; searched all the Mediterranean, the coast of Africa, any city in Europe on the banks of a river or

a lake or an inlet sea. Her manager in Athens, Karlovassi, was the first person I contacted, but she'd broken off their relationship, and he didn't have a clue to her whereabouts. I wrote to every personal manager my contacts in the music business could muster; I didn't expect her to use her real name again, but I described her in detail and hoped that one of them might provide a lead. Most had heard of me and wrote back respectful, friendly letters, but none had recently signed a Greek-born singer like the one I'd described. With the skill of someone who'd done all this before, too many times to consider, she had covered her tracks expertly.

I searched from Cyprus to Sicily, from Morocco and Abidjan; but there was nothing that said she couldn't as easily have flown to South America, or Australia, or even the U.S. After six months I realized it was futile — a deaf man who couldn't even use the phone, relying on letters and cables and personal visits to a hundred different clubs in dozens of seacoast cities. After six months I surrendered to the inevitable and returned to Paris, where Dr. Bousquet was happy and relieved to see me.

The tympanoplasty was successful, and today I have perhaps 50 percent of my hearing restored in my right ear — enough to hear people's voices, enough to compose, even enough for the occasional small club date. When I first returned to the Portmann Institute, it was as a man defeated; I felt ashamed for my failure, my surrender. It was only as my hearing slowly began to return that I realized something important; something most people are never even aware of; something even I, while deaf, had not truly been conscious of.

I started listening to people talk, at the same time watching them as I had trained myself to watch them while deaf — and I realized that what they were saying did not, in most cases, even matter; their intentions, their feelings, their souls, if you will, were all there in their eyes, and hands, and faces. In the way they smiled, or frowned, or swatted at an insect; in the way they shook your hand, or touched your shoulder, or raised a hand in greeting. The words helped for more abstract concepts, but the essence of them was there to be seen, not heard. The voices truly didn't matter. And that was when I started looking for her again.

Back in Sonoma, I can call any agency, any manager in the world; I can fax a drawing I had made of her to any club I want; I can access, through my Macintosh, newspaper reviews of singers at small cabarets the world over. I'm getting closer; it's only a question of time. When I think I have

a good lead, I arrange a club date in that city, or that area, and I look. I look for long black hair and sad eyes and a café thronged with devoted fans. And I don't believe any gods could be so capricious as to condemn a woman to eternal loneliness, just for the sin of vanity, long repented.

According to legend, Odysseus, while passing the isle of the Sirens, had his crew stuff their ears with wax, then bind him to the mast, so that he might hear the exquisitely beautiful music, yet not fall prey to it. But the legend, like many legends, is wrong. I alone have heard the true Siren's song, and it was silent.



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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 49

In the October issue, we asked for "Science Fiction Graffiti": 4 line aabb poems about an SF author or character. Lots of quality and variety in your responses, including this reaction from Miki Magyar:

Oh, this was a hard one to do!
It's not that ideas were few,
But as I would nurse
Each promising verse,
A limerickal lilt would slip through!

The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

Harlan Ellison
Said, "Though you're zealous, son,
And also have talent and judgment and
a star-spanning fancy,
Baby Moguls want more: try necromancy."

Isaac Asimov, Ph. D.,
Types away incessantly
And thinks that he shall never see
Poems lovely as a pulpwood tree.

Farnsworth Wright
Stalked the night,
Prowling for authors to give us
More words like "eldrich" and "gibbous."

Philip Jose Farmer
Ignited a four-alarm
When, the genteel to vex,
He invented sex.

— John Beifuss
Memphis, TN

SECOND PRIZE

Maxi thews and mini brains!
Conan is reborn again!
But the clones lack
Howard's knack.

If you choose profundity
Of thought over rotundity
Of phrase, would Delany win,
Or Ms. Le Guin?

Wanted, young Hero. See Orson Scott
Card.
For anguish, adventure, a life that is
hard.
(Your friends will betray you, you'll
sweat to the bone,
And once you hit puberty, you're on
your own.)

— Miki Magyar
Boulder, CO

RUNNERS UP

Pinot grand Fenwick (that's Wibberly's
wine)
Took the Mouse to the moon, in manner
benign.
I'd take such a trip, using spirits more
strong,
But the overall voyage won't last near
as long.

To sea and sky and nigh earth's core
His early visions fly — and more;
His stories speak the quest eternal,
Jules of pen, still fresh and Verne-al

— David Shapiro
Colmar Manor, MD

* * *

Larry and Jerry
craft epics quite hairy
without a whiff of cybertough
content to quaff the old hard stuff.

Like the man upon the stair
Everywhere and yet nowhere:
Philip Dick's
Become *Ubik*.

— Mark Martel
Dayton, OH

What? You mean you haven't heard?

HE calls himself Cordwainer Bird
When cretins reduce his words of art
To little more than an audible fart.

— Peter Wong
San Francisco, CA

Graffiti's not just empty rhyme,
It bears its author's thoughts through
time.

My graffiti's hard to top
I wrote it on a Weapons Shop.

— Robert Sheahan
Lakeside, CT

Competition 50 (suggested by Brian Lumley)*

Send us up to six "mini-sagas," i.e., SF stories of exactly (no more, no less) 50 words. We'll probably allow hyphenated words if we like the entry enough. For example:

WAR OF THE WORLDS II

Ron and Mikh, joining forces, went out to explore space. There they found an alien race: weird shapes, sizes — sexes! Outnumbered, the armies of Ron and Mikh bred and bred, finally defeating their diversified foe. Mankind stood no chance against intelligent amoebas whose single strategy was to divide and conquer.

**This is to acknowledge credit for this idea to Brian Aldiss and the Sunday Telegraph. Also, to Rob Meades and David Wake, who have compiled collections of "Drabbles," which are 100-word science fiction stories.*

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by February 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 50 will appear in the June Issue.

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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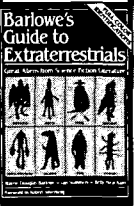
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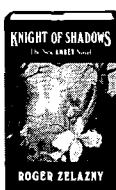
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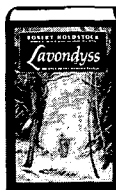
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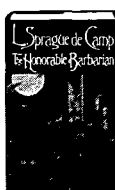
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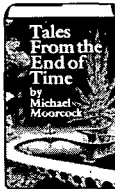
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